

## Editorial

**Elizabeth Winter, Director of Development**

This is the last *Pelican in Brief*. *PinB* (as it is now affectionately known) was started as a way of communicating with our worldwide community during lockdown, keeping alumni and friends informed about the College, the Fellows, staff and students – wherever they might be living and working. As the weeks went by, we added new voices, including those of alumni and *PinB* has been the richer and more fascinating for it.

I know from the feedback I receive with each issue that these snapshots of Corpus, its academic narrative and the social braiding of the place with its members, resonate warmly with alumni. The strange, dislocating times in which we've all been living have prompted many to talk about personal experiences, unexpected hardship or loneliness, or illness and problems with mental health.



Sometimes the experiences of isolation have resulted in positive outcomes; who knew that a Zoom call could be the breeding ground for love? Getting to know neighbours and strengthened community is a common story. But many have also spoken of the enduring importance of the College in their lives. We are extremely grateful to all those who have been generous both financially and in practical things; these are hard times for many and all support is being put to good use. If one dominant theme has emerged over these past four months it is the way the Corpus community has drawn closer together. Perhaps a sense of belonging to a place which cannot be destroyed either physically or intellectually by a global catastrophe is a reassurance sought and found within these familiar, ancient walls.

This final issue offers two fascinating stories about the challenges of opening up research labs after lockdown from Professors Judy Hirst and Chris Howe, and the voice of Dr Maria Rostovskaya, a stem cell scientist at the Babraham Institute and Praeceptor at Corpus, who volunteered to work in one of the government's national COVID testing centres.

Interim Bursar Dr David Secher describes how the College is preparing for the return of students in Michaelmas, and Dr Philippa Hoskin talks about how the Venerable Bede illustrates the meaningful bridges we should draw between the past and present. Finally, we introduce the new Bursar-elect, Ms Jenny Raine, who will be joining the College in September.

I hope there is something here to inspire you, and that you have found the ten issues of *PinB* a useful diversion from the more difficult challenges of isolation, dysfunction and anxiety. May we all meet up in College soon.

Floreat Antiqua Domus.

*Photograph taken before lockdown restrictions.*



## News from the College

**Professor Christopher Howe, Professor of Plant and Microbial Biochemistry, President and Director of Studies in Preclinical Medicine**

Today was a very ordinary day for me. It was also an extraordinary day. It was ordinary in that I went into my lab in the Biochemistry Department. It was extraordinary in that I went into my lab in the Biochemistry Department. Almost all University labs were closed in late March as COVID-19 hit.

If you are an experimental scientist, as the people in my research group are, it is very difficult to carry on with much research work if you can't access your lab. So it is a tremendous relief that we are now being allowed back into our labs, although with tough restrictions on numbers at any time. Biochemists typically share lab space and specialist equipment, and it is impossible for the usual number of researchers to be in the lab together while maintaining the expected degree of social distancing. Planning how to manage this for a large Department has been complex. We have to control the number of people in at any time, as well as minimise the number of people with whom any individual interacts, down to the detail of having one-way systems on staircases. Closing the labs in an orderly way was quick, done within a few days. The partial reopening has taken weeks to plan, with careful work from administrative and support staff as well as academics.

Some staff in my Department are working on projects to do with the COVID-19 virus, and they have been able to continue work, although again with careful control on numbers. It's been impressive to see how effectively colleagues have been able to apply their knowledge from other projects to tackling this virus. Some are working on how to make antibody tests more specific.



A test may be able to identify everyone who has had the infection, but if it also incorrectly reports as infected many people who have not actually been infected ('false positives') it may be counterproductive, so it is important to ensure good specificity for a test. Other colleagues are using knowledge of the detailed biochemistry of coronaviruses to see if some of their molecular quirks can be used as targets for new drugs. All these projects are powerful demonstrations of the fact that scientific research in one area can very rapidly have huge but unforeseen implications for important work in other areas.



Although there is great relief as the rest of us start to come back to our labs, the return won't be straightforward. The restrictions on numbers will limit the pace of our work, and it is very possible that future infections will mean we have to put down our pipettes again and leave with very little notice, and the pandemic will certainly have a major effect on the research funding climate for some time to come. At least we can now make a start.

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## Reflections from the Fellowship

**Professor Judy Hirst, Dean of College and currently Interim Director of the Medical Research Council Mitochondrial Biology Unit describes the challenges of closing - and opening - a research department.**

March was a month of drastic changes in perspective in the Director's Office. Starting with disbelief (hold the line, business as usual) followed by a dawning realisation and uncertainty (normality beginning to break down), and finally the relief of a clear direction: close the building.

Not in itself difficult – we do it every Christmas. But then Christmas is planned, and doesn't last for months. This time it was a mass evacuation as the enemy advanced: get everyone out to where they wanted to be, equipped to work from home as effectively as possible.

Experiments, some of which had been running for weeks, had to be simply switched off, while our IT guys rushed around enabling our computers to work from home too.

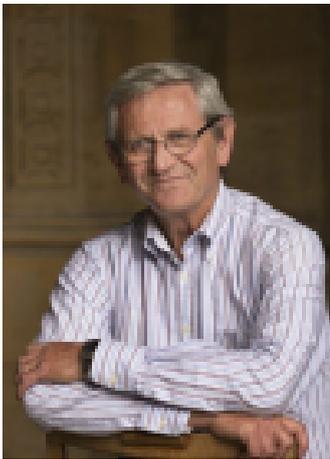


I naively thought that calm might then descend and I'd have the perfect opportunity to catch up on writing all those papers – but I was wrong. It turns out that running a closed department is just as much work as running an open one (if not more). My dining room became the command centre, and we all learned the joys of Zoom. Meetings of my Management Group, now endowed with the illustrious title of 'Gold', became a surprising highlight of each week. Mitochondrial research hasn't got much to offer in the fight against COVID-19 – but we gave our PPE to the NHS, and seconded staff to testing centres. We continue to do our best to maintain our community, support those who've found the lockdown conditions hard – and keep our research going.

But just when I thought I'd got working from home sorted, the Prime Minister opened the door to returning to research. Immediately, from principal investigators to postdocs to students, the researchers wanted to get back to work. This was no surprise – it's one of the characteristics for which the system selects. But it wasn't that simple: the building had to be prepared, rules had to be written, risk assessments completed, forms filled in and students relocated. And so the month leading up to 15 June (when I finally opened the doors) was the hardest for me, trying to reconcile frustrated scientists with University operational requirements, and enable research without compromising safety. Now we've struck an uneasy balance, operating under heavy restrictions with the freedom to research severely curtailed. With the next relaxation of government guidelines about to happen, I hope I'll be rewriting all those rules again shortly...

I really miss informal interactions these days, whether chatting to students I encounter by chance in the corridor or court, having coffee with my research group, or shared observations and discussions with colleagues after a meeting or lecture – they all add huge personal and scientific value. Scientific conferences aren't half so productive if you don't frequent the bar (or so I've been told). In the longer term, being present in the lab and in College, in the physical space and in the community, is a crucial way for us all to feel connected and part of the wider endeavour, and a forum where we share and exchange ideas and experiences. Lockdown has demonstrated that we're capable of controlling and managing this current challenge to our ways of life. As a scientist, I'm holding to the faith that our collective research efforts will eventually work out how to deal with it for good.

*Image: Dean of College during the lockdown: familiar with PPE at home as well as at work.*



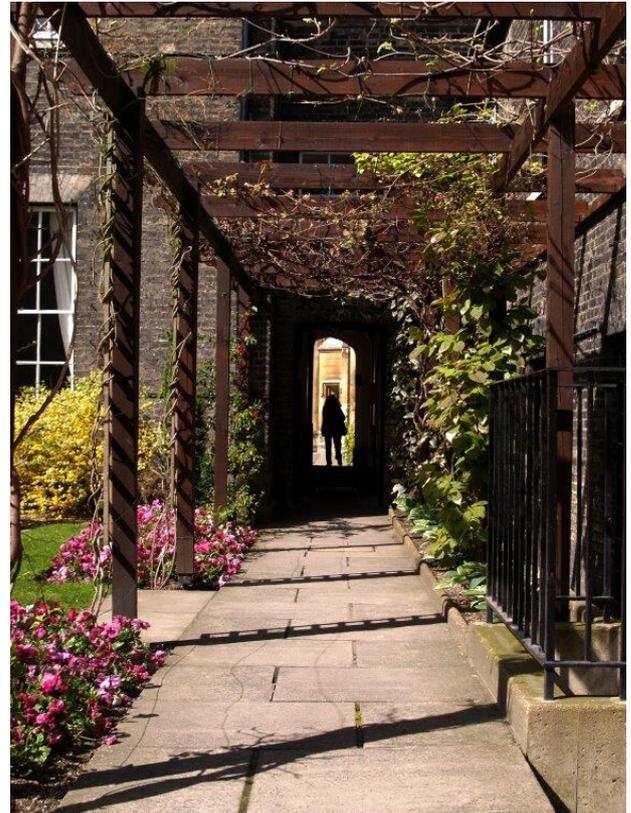
**Dr David Secher, reflects on his time as Interim Bursar during these new and interesting times.**

As you read this I shall have done more than half of my time as Interim Bursar and Corpus has just appointed a new permanent Bursar (see the announcement at the end of this newsletter). The work I have been doing is not at all what I was expecting and the perks – High Table and other social events – all stopped within a fortnight of my arrival. But I expect no sympathy; others have had far greater turmoil in their lives as a result of COVID-19.

My priorities during the past three months have been to shut down the College in an orderly fashion; to furlough those staff who cannot work from home; and to prepare for the return of students to a safe environment that complies with ever-changing guidance. It has been challenging, but rewarding too, thanks to the expertise and loyalty of the wonderful staff of the College. Most staff (around 70 per cent) are on furlough and, of the remainder, all but a handful are working from home. For the skeleton staff in College, it is eerily quiet (though very beautiful in the emptiness and the sunshine). Those at home have struggled with turning bedrooms into offices and learning new virtual ways of working. For those on furlough, the novelty of being on indefinite 'holiday', but unable to travel, has long since worn off. We all long for a return to normality.

Despite the physical separations, the 120 or so staff of Corpus remain a cohesive community. I have been really impressed how the Heads of Departments and their staff have pulled together and worked out how to collaborate to keep the College alive. No sign of the silos that some colleges suffer from. Staff have shown flexibility in their working hours and practices. We have introduced matrix management techniques (perhaps for the first time in 668 years?) to set up a cross-departmental Task Force to manage the return of students to College, by-passing normal communication channels and delegating authority to speed up timelines. We keep in touch with those on furlough, caring for their physical and mental wellbeing by suggesting training or volunteering opportunities.

The Easter Term is over. It is May Week and we should be celebrating the students' achievements. Instead we are deep in preparation for their return – or their beginning – in October. It won't be back to normal, but the Corpus staff are doing all they can to plan for students to be able to return to an environment where they can study in safety and enjoy the experience that is uniquely Cambridge.



## Praeceptor's Story

**Dr Maria Rostovskaya, stem cell scientist at the Babraham Institute and Praeceptor at Corpus, volunteered to work in the national COVID testing programme.**

The COVID-19 crisis brought a feeling of uncertainty and fear for the future to everyone. However, for me, a laboratory-based stem cell biologist, it also added frustration over not being able to use my skills to help the situation. I could stay at home working on computational analysis without much damage to my project, but I could not escape a bitter feeling that at that moment my skills were needed much more to fight the crisis.

Life changed in just one day with the heart-breaking news that our Institute Director, Michael Wakelam, died of suspected COVID-19. We all felt utter shock and disbelief. Everything feels different when trouble is so close to home. And by an extraordinary coincidence, just two hours later another email arrived, with a call for volunteers to work at the National COVID Testing programme. There were no doubts about what to do. This sense of duty to contribute was even stronger because one of the last of Michael's emails to the Institute was to encourage us to join volunteering programmes to fight the COVID pandemic.



*Image: Milton Keynes volunteers.*

The next events were surreal. In less than 24 hours after my application, I was contacted and asked to arrive at the Milton Keynes Biocentre the next day at 10 a.m. and stay there for a few days for training. It was like recruitment in a war. On April 2 I packed my suitcase and did not unpack it for the next two and a half months. The testing programme began in the second half of March with the announcement of the government's goal to achieve 100,000 tests per day by the end of April. The centre was up and running in just two weeks. The first group of five volunteers arrived on March 27; I was among the second group. It was exciting to witness how this testing centre was built from scratch, in an empty hangar space, using equipment donated by shut down research institutes. There was an amazing pulling together of effort, including the British Army who helped with the logistics, Amazon who agreed to deliver the test samples for free, and all the volunteers. By the end of April, about two hundred volunteers worked in the programme, including undergraduate and PhD students, post-docs, junior and senior group leaders, from all over the UK – Cambridge, Oxford, London, Bath, Leicester, Sheffield, Nottingham and many other places.

The centre operated around the clock with volunteers working in twelve-hour day and night shifts. The momentum was phenomenal. We could perform just five hundred tests a day at the beginning of April, but by the end of the month this had expanded to more than 20,000 tests a day. The devotion and drive of the whole team made it happen. In one of my last shifts, we broke a record of nearly 30,000 tests in 24 hours. In the early hours on June 9, the centre passed 1,000,000 samples processed in total, and there is a real person behind each sample.



It was an extraordinary period in my life, living half-time in Milton Keynes and half-time back home, doing twelve-hour shifts COVID testing, still working on the projects and grants, and supervising students of all my eight colleges from home on so-called "days off". For the first time in my life, my skin peeled off my hands from pipetting all day long. For the first time in my life, I had to take painkillers to relieve the aching in my finger joints from opening tubes all day long. I was driving back and forth on empty roads between Milton Keynes and Cambridge, passing the signs saying "Essential travel only" and thinking that all I want is this pandemic to be over.

It is finally reassuring to watch how life is slowly returning back to our cities, step by step. It makes it feel as though the effort was worth it.

I served my last shift on June 12. I felt extremely emotional to say thank you and goodbye to the amazing people I worked with, who all became like a big family. I am grateful to have been part of this unimaginable experience, which has definitely changed me and which I will never forget.





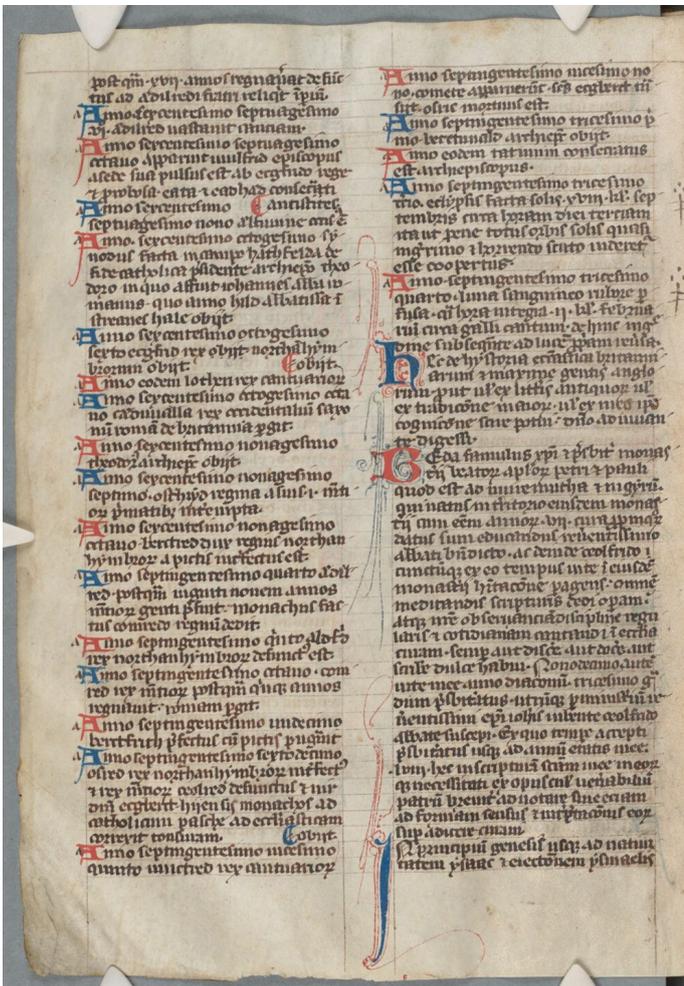
## Observations from the Past

Dr Philippa Hoskin, Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Fellow Librarian, reflects on what Bede has to teach us about drawing lessons from the past.

When the world seems to turn upside down, and old certainties evaporate, many people find themselves taking stock of the old, assessing what should usefully be kept, and making plans for a new and uncertain future. For a historian, this often prompts reflection about what is in danger of being lost or forgotten, and inspires them to draw meaningful bridges between the past and the present.

Bede (c.673–735 C.E.), sometimes known as the "Father of English History", was surely influenced in his work by the dramatic events of his childhood. Towards the end of his most famous work, the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bede provides the only information he ever gives his reader about himself:

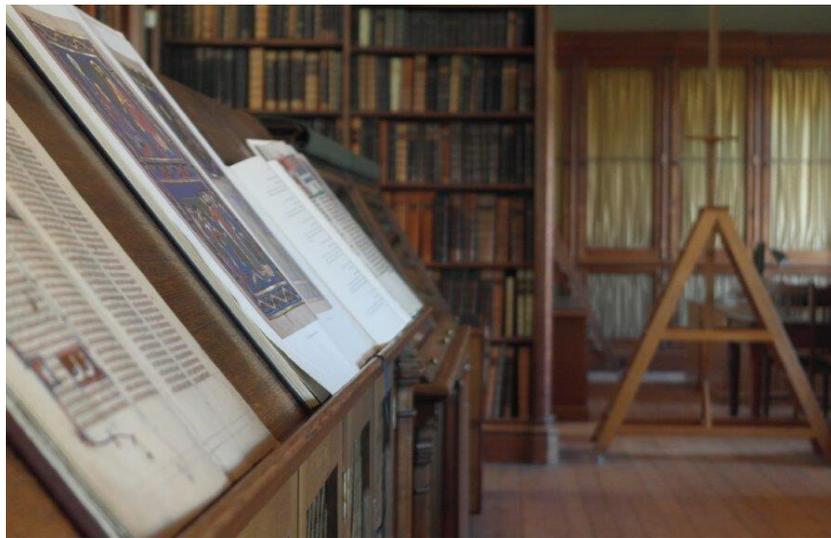
"Bede, the servant of God, and priest of the monastery of the blessed apostles, Peter and Paul, which is at Wearmouth and Jarrow; who being born in the territory of that same monastery, was given, at seven years of age, to be educated by the most reverend Abbot Benedict, and afterwards by Ceolfrith."



This connection with the abbot Ceolfrith provides us with a significant clue about Bede's life and underlying motivation for his life's work. In the life of Ceolfrith we're told that in the great plague of 686 C.E. only Ceolfrith and his young pupil (long identified as Bede) went unharmed. They carried on the services together and as lone survivors they refounded the monasteries, maintaining the reassuring continuities of former times, but also going on to forge a new scholastic outlook.

Amongst Matthew Parker's manuscripts at Corpus are three copies of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. One is an eleventh-century version in Old English, the translation made at King Alfred's (848/849–899 C.E.) instruction, and the other two are fourteenth-century Latin versions. Interestingly, Parker himself found Bede's work useful when he came to write his own version of the history of the English Church, one which attempted to cast the upheaval of the Protestant Reformation in England as less of a rupture or innovation and more of a returning to the old ways of doing things.

*Image: CCCC ms 159 f. 69v.*



Evidence of Parker's close engagement with these works is plain because we can still see where he marked up the text. One thing that particularly seems to have appealed to Parker is the discovery that Bede, like himself, supported his scholastic work by the collecting of books. In the medieval manuscript biography of Bede (MS 159 f. 69v) Parker has carefully underlined in his distinctive red pencil the phrase "*Moreover, he gathered together a most famous library*".



## **Corpus Christi College announces appointment of new Bursar**

Corpus is delighted to announce the appointment of Ms Jenny Raine as its next Bursar. The Bursar is an ancient position in the College, responsible for all the financial and other non-educational aspects of the College's operations. Jenny is an experienced Finance and Operations Director, who has held a variety of posts in public sector and not-for-profit organisations. For the last fifteen years she has held director-level posts in the NHS and as Bursar at Newnham College. Jenny has also held trustee positions on the boards of several charitable organisations in and around Cambridge. Jenny is a chartered accountant and a graduate of the University of York in Biochemistry. She will take up the post on 1 September 2020.

Jenny lives in Stetchworth near Newmarket and when not at work enjoys listening to, and participating in, music as well as taking part in a wide variety of outdoor activities with her family.

The Master of Corpus commented, "We are delighted to welcome Jenny into the Corpus community. Jenny was selected following an exhaustive global search involving discussions with more than two hundred people. The three best were selected for final interviews (by Zoom) following visits to the College and meetings with key Fellows and staff. Jenny was the unanimous choice of the appointment committee."

Jenny added, "I am absolutely delighted to be joining Corpus. I am very much looking forward to supporting the College to continue to thrive as an academic community through these challenging times and into the future."

Corpus was assisted in making this appointment by Minerva Executive Search Ltd.

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*Pelican in Brief* is available on our website and all issues can be found [here](#).

This is the final issue.

For further information, please visit our website [www.corpus.cam.ac.uk](http://www.corpus.cam.ac.uk) or contact  
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