

What is a college?

Is it a random collection of bodies or a carefully orchestrated, collated totality?

Is it a family or is that just a fluffy, meaningless title and one which for some, would be an anathema.

Is it a business or an educational establishment? both which, of course are essentially inseparable and each of which claims the superior position.

A collegium or college was any association in ancient Rome that acted as a legal entity, civil or religious. The word collegium literally means "society". Is this College, this society, a body of individual living cells dependent on the body for survival and growth just for a period of time, ultimately to be fired off to independence? Or is it a Mater whose umbilical attachment becomes theoretically, an engine of subsequent social, emotional, and cognitive development for years to come? The University of Bologna, purported to be the oldest university, where teaching began in 1088 has as its motto 'Alma Mater Studiorum', Nourishing Mother of the Studies.

Here in Cambridge, there are 31 Colleges each governed by its own statutes and regulations but integral to the make-up of the University of Cambridge. The students' nourishing mother is their own, autonomous college but overall, it is the Regent House, the governing body, the legislative body and principal electoral constituency of the University, which holds sway.

So, to ask What is a College? Here in Cambridge is not quite as easily defined as in a non-collegiate university.

What is Robinson College? How is Robinson College embodied in its communal members? Is Robinson College embodied in its members? I refer back to my rather naive analogy of Family, with fond recall of Gilbert and Sullivans 'Pirates of Penzance' and the long suffering First Lord of the Admiralty singing about 'his sisters and his cousins whom he reckons up in dozens and his aunts!' So, not just the students but the staff in all the various departments, gardens, housekeeping, kitchens, maintenance, admin, porters lodge.

What did the founder David Robinson see as its role, its mission, its USP? Certainly, the much vaunted 'strong sense of community and relaxed atmosphere' is prevalent. (oh, and the best college food). However, did this self-effacing philanthropist actually set out in his benefaction, in stark terms, any philosophies and practices expected of the incumbents? Did he wander about the burgeoning building site until he saw a framework on which the College ethics could be built? there is nothing recorded. He did though work closely with Lord Jack Lewis, the first Warden, and one might assume that he, Lord Lewis, was privy to David Robinson's thoughts and inner workings. Certainly, his generous and avuncular presence, as first in the role, created an exceptionally congenial and wholesome atmosphere for everyone and it permeated throughout the College. It certainly was not just a collection of organic material banging around in a brand-new brick-built petri dish.

How does College work then. Is it a democratic cohort? Who drives it? Is it the Warden, is he the Head Boy to the College Council or is he

an equal partner? Is he the 'first among equals' in the Governing Body; they, who then delegate the day-to-day operations out to the College Council? Here, might be an example of the point I raised earlier about the uneasy bed fellows of education v's business. And, apart from the variety of academic departments, assigned their various professional tasks, there are other internal parts of the corporate body to be upheld, and opinions considered. The SCR committee, The MCR Committee, The RCSA, all independent yet conspiratorial positions, with their own agendas and of fundamental importance to this place, all endeavouring to work symbiotically but for benefit from the perspectives of their own agendas. And, the sports teams, we might not all be participants but how many have we, across what disciplines? What part does Robinson College play in University of Cambridge league tables? How many people know we have an international Cross Country Champion in our midst? An international weightlifter? We might be the younger sibling, but we don't need to be shy, shouldn't we be trumpeting our achievements in a louder voice. In terms of the importance of student opinion, an interesting fact is that neither David Robinson nor Lord Lewis saw the need for Latin Grace or gowns as a quotidian principle, but the early student body sought their inclusion as symbolic of a 'classical' Cambridge College. Are those students, now very successful members' of their professions across the world, proud to acknowledge their membership of Robinson College? One would hope so, but might we, could we, be engendering a more 'Rah Rah Robinson' attitude from Matriculation Day onwards. Perhaps not pompom waving cheer leaders, but, why not!

Not to prick anyone's bubble, like a family, fall outs happen. The less favourable situation might be one where a parasitic relationship flourishes on the weakness of another. Who hasn't experienced sibling rivalry, jealousies, a less than favourable place in the pecking order, not much status in the status quo? Irritations and breakdowns in relationships are inevitable. The practice of mature leadership and

good council, promote resolution and never were the 'peace makers' more 'Blessed'. Any collection of personalities and characters will all be exposed to situations beyond their control, even in Lovely Robinson College.

It may also have been noted that as yet, I have not addressed any 'woke' issues. Equality, diversity, inclusivity, awareness, support and provision for mental health issues, LGBTQ expectations. All these issues are, quite rightly, now enshrined in the workings of Robinson College and openly addressed as and when a particular situation arises. Treated with compassion and dignity. None of the above could have ever been in any original manifesto worked on by Lord Lewis or David Robinson, they were not in the lexicon of, all but a handful of people, academically or nationally, even as late as the 1970's.

Is Robinson College in a stronger position to adapt to changes in current debates, nationally and internationally, not having the weight of centuries old stones pressing down on it? Whilst respecting the very essence of being a part of the world-renowned University of Cambridge might not, we, the youngsters have a few innovations to stir up the old brigade, even 50 years on from our founding? For starters our en-suite rooms. This innovation was surely the envy of students in the other colleges. No padding along a draughty landing to a shared, antiquated bathroom for our students.

Robinson College must keep forging ahead with insightful and exciting projects, whilst being respectful and holding in the highest regard, the excellence of the banner under which it operates.

Robinson College has changed across 50 years, though not out of all recognition. The basic tenets which Lord Lewis set in motion were in a form that ensured they could be protected and respected, then and now; that they could be carried on into this millennium and beyond.

Courtesy, thoughtfulness, professional integrity, striving for excellence, kindness, these are keystone concepts for success and growth in an ever more turbulent and riven academic world.

What is a college?

This is.

Robinson College is.