

## Senior Fellows Club - Winter Newsletter 2024

Clearly, my first task as new Honorary Secretary of the Senior Fellows Club is to express my thanks to my predecessor, Nick Bateman, both for the efficient discharge of his secretarial duties over the last 3 years and for his ongoing help as I attempt to fill his considerably-sized shoes.

As Nick noted in his last newsletter, the SFC in-person attendance has stabilised following the impact of Covid, with upwards of 40 attending the lectures and lunch, although the last lecture of 2024 (of which more later) was attended by a capacity audience of 60. As approved at the AGM in October, Nick has now taken over from Helen Zealley as Chair, and we all remain very grateful to Helen for the gracious way in which she fulfilled her duties over the preceding 12 months.

Our first lecturer of the Winter season was George Lowder MBE, who in his 9 year stint as Chief Exec for Edinburgh Transport, was well placed to address his topic of City Mobility 2030. We learned of successes such as the progress made in moving towards a clean bus fleet, the on time and on budget completion of the tram line to Newhaven and the delivery of the Edinburgh Cycle Hire Scheme. This latter success then became a setback as the Cycle Scheme fell victim to significant theft and vandalism during the Covid outbreak. It is clear, however, that George and his team generate the resilience and determination which will see the scheme "back on track" in due course.

We then heard from Isabel Gordon, a retired teacher of Botany/Zoology from the Borders, on the life of Mary Sommerville, the acclaimed Scottish scientist and polymath. Isabel took us through Mary's early life, including her childhood years in Burntisland. She studied what, from the perspective of the 21st Century, was an astonishing array of subjects ranging from Latin, Greek and French through to algebra, geometry, mathematics, geography, chemistry and astronomy. She carried out research on the relationship between light and magnetism, with her first paper published in the Proceedings of the Royal Society in 1826. Her social and scientific connections were studded with well-known scientific and literary names of the 19th Century.

The third, and last, lecture of 2024 was delivered by someone from our own time whose interests and abilities also covered a wide spectrum. Dr John Reid MBE, onetime Consultant Radiologist and Associate Medical Director in the Borders General Hospital, shared with us the fruit of his lifelong interest in Scottish archaeology and the impact of the Romans on the history and development of Scotland. He shared several insights into the different lenses through which archaeological study of this topic has been viewed over the last 100 years, with much more detail being available in his recently published book "The

Eagle and the Bear". The Scots amongst the readership will be interested that despite being the most fearsome military machine of the time, they were completely unable to subdue Caledonia despite having one sixth of the Roman Empire's military manpower in Scotland for a significant period of the 2nd century AD.

We look ahead to lectures over the next few months on Islam and Medicine, Covert Assassination, The History of Flying, as well our SFC Guest lunch on 11th March.

Regular RCPE visitors may not be aware that the College has access to the Queen St Gardens. One of our former Committee Members Philip Welsby visited it and has written a short piece on this and some of the College's other features, below. Philip is moving to Bristol to be closer to family and we wish him well.

The SFC Chair, Nick Bateman, has also contributed a short piece on his issues with coffee.

As has been noted elsewhere, our strength lies in the diversity of our interests as well as the cohesion of shared ideals. May I wish you a wonderful 2025.

John Wilson  
SFC Honorary Secretary

## A visit to the College



Most non-retired Fellows visit the College for specific purposes and tend not to have time to enjoy the peripheral attributes of the College. After a Senior Fellows Club Committee meeting, I had time to spare and whilst wandering, lonely as a cloud, in search of a host of golden daffodils, I realised that the College had access to the East Queen Street Gardens. Accordingly, on your behalf, I used the key (available to all on request at the College Reception) to enter this tranquil refuge. There are five and a half acres of green space, metaphorically far from surrounding madding crowd – there were only three other visitors.

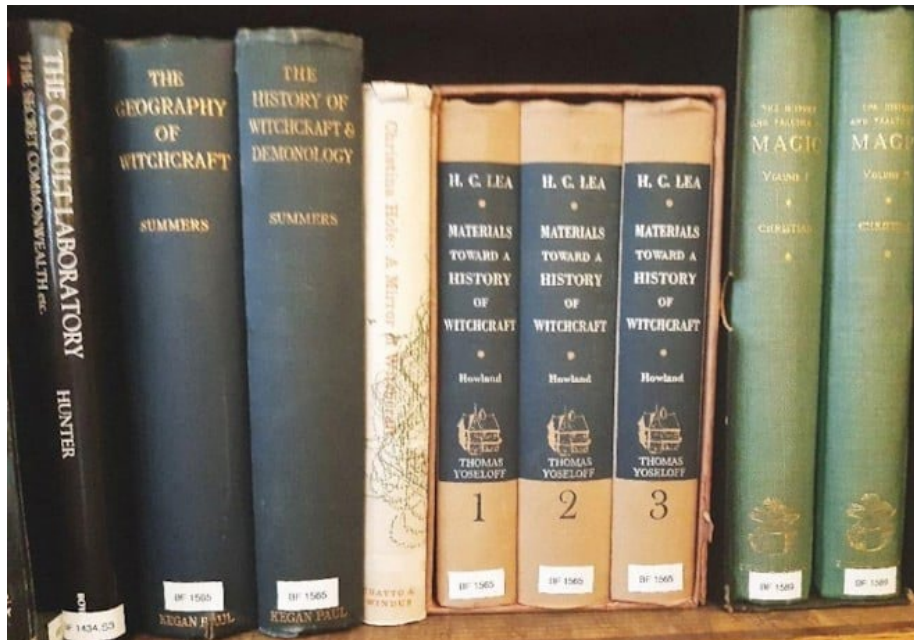
There is even a Greek Temple, fulfilling the role of a garden shed, now used for storing agricultural artefacts rather than cultural artefacts. There is a passage beneath Queen

Street that allowed Fellows to avoid the traffic of crossing Queen Street. Sadly, both the entrance and exit of this escape route are now closed and the Garden end is now overgrown.

Similarly, a wandering through the libraries provides much of interest (including pictures of the sought after daffodils). The three libraries have a history. The Top Library is on the top floor above the reading room and was established in 1896 (previously that space had been the College's museum). The Front Library (which includes the reading room) is the oldest and was established after the College was first built in 1844. The New Library came into existence in 1868 (when land was purchased behind the existing College building).



The section on Witchcraft occupies the same shelf space as does the Four volumes Oxford Textbook of Clinical Medicine!



There are also books dealing with the care of horses – Fellows used to park their horses where now cars are parked. I was informed that older books are situated according to their physical size rather than the importance of their content. These days, electronic cataloguing rapidly identifies all available books on subjects, no matter how obscure. For example, “On sledge and horseback to the outcast Siberian lepers” One 17<sup>th</sup> Century book

dealt with “*The process of training running horse, &c. with a view of ascertain whether the same can furnish any hints serviceable to the human species*” Another dealt with “*Horse-back riding, from a medical point of view*” There was even account of Horseshoe kidneys.

The Great Hall has two curiosities. There is the potential for perpetual daylight conferred by floodlights external to the roof that illuminate the top windows. On percussion the marble columns are revealed to be hollow comprising linoleum tubes concealing girders (a not uncommon practice, the George Hotel has similar artefacts, and I do wonder about Marble Arch).

In the College reception area there are many College mementoes for sale. I happened to remark that Royal College hats (see picture) were described as baseball hats, but a Senior Fellow reassured me that they were golf hats. My imaginings of Fellows playing baseball in the Gardens were sadly disabused.

Kind regards,  
Philip Welsby 2024  
SFC Member



## On coffee

Coffee houses were first introduced into the UK in Oxford in 1650 at the Angel Coaching Inn. It was regarded as a ‘penny university’ as it offered, for the price of a coffee, a place for discussion and learning as it was frequented by the academics of the time. When Coffee Houses were set up in London, they were both social and then financial hubs. The name of one still survives today, in Lloyds, where shipping insurance systems were set up.

My first memories of coffee drinking go back to the age of 4 or 5. This was the 1950’s and coffees were certainly all instant in our house. I remember being on holiday in Llandudno, and after the early evening meal my parents were served coffee. My mother noticed tears pouring down my cheeks, I had not been given a cup. With some consternation the issue was rectified, but it seems I may have been attracted to coffee at a very young age indeed.

I first realised I had a real problem with coffee when I went on holiday 40 years ago. We were staying in a cottage on the beach on the coast of Ayrshire. On the first day I was

there I developed a splitting headache. Initially I thought I was getting a rare migraine, brought on by the relaxation, but I had no 'zigzags' in my field of vision, usually associated with my migraines. It was only when my astute wife asked me about my coffee drinking at work that I realised this was a caffeine withdrawal headache. I realised that at work I was drinking 6 cups of strong coffee by lunchtime! My intake has dropped a little over the years, but I still feel I need my espresso at 10 am and a second at 11!

There are studies suggesting caffeine metabolism slows with aging, and that this contributes to insomnia in the aging population. When I now have a post-dinner coffee at a restaurant my sleep seems unaffected, but there be other drinks taken pre-coffee that account for that. As a pharmacologist I feel one should take active drugs, so I am afraid decaffeinated coffee has no appeal.

Italian coffee houses were a novelty to me until I went to a medical conference in Milan in the 1980's. I was told quite clearly by my host that there were strict conventions on which coffee you should order at different times of the day. I remember cappuccino in Milan was an acceptable morning drink for men, but never after 11am. This must have rubbed off on me as I now drink tea in the afternoon, not the coffee I used to years ago.

I have always thought that US coffee chains ruined the taste of coffee and find airports a particular problem as there are usually only franchised outlets. The beans always seemed bitter and over roasted to me, although others delight in their products. The impact of these coffee outlets on modern culture should not be minimised. In Seattle, where Starbucks started, at some junctions there are street crossings with coffee outlets on every corner. Even Edinburgh now seems to have a coffee shop every 10 yards in suburban shopping streets. Perhaps it is my native Yorkshire parsimony, but I just can't see the value in a cup at some of the prices charged. I think the most I ever paid for a take-away cup was at Basle railway station, 11 euros (at the time about £10), but my personal excuse was that it was 11am, and my first of the day. You can see what addiction does, even to a Yorkshireman. I still resent the queue, waiting for 10 minutes for a cup of coffee - really?

My taste in coffee has certainly changed, and instant coffees I consumed for ease for the best part of my working life no longer hit the mark. Single espressos with a drop of cold milk are now my preference. Why cold milk? The process of heating the milk alters the taste making it seem sweeter. Perhaps I am becoming more and more like my wife, as couples are reputed to do. She has always preferred espresso, so no doubt eventually my milk will go.

My current choice of brew has had an added benefit of observing human nature, allowing me to study waiters in particular. It seems no matter how clearly I say 'single espresso with a splash of cold milk on the side for me and single espresso for my wife' the waiter will

almost always give my wife the milk. On an overseas trip to Australia in 2023 only one waiter got the milk to the correct person- but it was hot milk, so a fail there too!

On another occasion a male waiter read the order, taken by a woman, and decided she must be wrong when serving it and reversed the service order. To his perplexity, we just dissolved into laughter. I can't help feeling that this aspect of human behaviour warrants a thesis. Perhaps milk and female customers are just inherently linked in their consciousness. I wonder how many of us have noted similar gender biases.

Anyway, it is now time for my next coffee.....

Nick Bateman 2024  
SFC Chair

## Further information

The Senior Fellows Club is a community of over 190 retired doctors who meet up regularly. They have a [programme of events](#) throughout the year, including monthly Lecture & Lunches, an annual Guest Lunch & Exhibition, and an annual Summer Outing.

To find out more, please see the Clubs pages on the [RCPE Website](#).

If you are interested in joining this thriving community, please complete this online [SFC application form](#) or email the clubs administrator – [sfc@rcpe.ac.uk](mailto:sfc@rcpe.ac.uk).



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