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Dear Friends,

Welcome to The Dolphin. I hope you will find the articles here give you insight into College life and the remarkable work of our students and Fellows in the last academic year.

Thank you for all your support for the College and for the guidance and help so many of you have given me personally in my first year. I now feel I truly belong in this community of students, alumnae, Fellows and hard-working professional teams. I learn so much every day still.

This year the College has raised more than £1.6m, including the very generous £1m gift from Christina and Peter Dawson to support the increased wellbeing provision for students.

I can’t say enough how vital the financial support of our alumnae is to our work, as is the help you give in other important ways.

The Development team has compiled some extraordinary statistics on your support. During the past decade of the Women Today, Women Tomorrow campaign, over 2,000 alumnae and other supporters have made a financial gift, and more than 650 of you have been mentors, speakers, year reps or taken part in the Gateway Programme – enabling us to do so much to help our students. I should like to thank every one of you and we are proud to include all our donors in the Roll of Benefactors included in this issue on page 40. In our forthcoming newsletters we will share more with you about Gateway and our other initiatives supported by you.

Some of the changes we have told you about are now bearing fruit.

Our Art Café opened in time for Freshers’ Week. It’s looking terrific and we will include pictures in the next newsletter once the art is up. Thanks to our alumnae who contributed towards this wonderful transformation. Already it’s a central part of student life and popular with everyone in the College. I can’t wait for the summer when we can start using the café’s roof terrace which has spectacular views over Fountain Court. We will change the art exhibited on a regular basis and include art created by students in our new Art Room. Please tell everyone you know that the café is open to the public too. We also have a fascinating special Still Life exhibition on the lower ground floor at present.

Since we gained strong publicity when we reverted to our art collection’s original name The Women’s Art Collection, we have noticed an increase in visitors and I enjoyed being able to welcome local schoolchildren back to college again post-Covid to create their own works, inspired by the collection. The collection was formed to inspire our students and it’s important that it should reflect the diverse backgrounds of the young women who study here. With that in mind, we have managed to acquire a small group of outstanding works by women artists of colour as such works comprised only 5% of the collection. Students have really appreciated the change. If you would like to help us acquire more works from artists of diverse backgrounds, please support our new Art Diversity Fund. You can find out more and donate at womensart.murrayedwards.cam.ac.uk

Our new Head of Student Recruitment, Matt Dixon, the first full-time professional expert in such a role at any Cambridge College, is in post and has begun work on our strategy to reach out more effectively to school students from underrepresented groups. As I told those of you who attended the Cambridge Alumnae Weekend, this year 26.9% of our UK freshers came from geographical areas of multiple deprivations, the highest percentage in our history. We can now also boast that we give students unrivalled support on entry with the expansion of the Gateway Programme to give academic and research support, help with personal development and careers advice. Thank you again to all of you who so generously support Gateway and our outreach activities with your donations and your time and expertise.

Some brilliant people have joined the College. The Venerable Mina Smallman, whose campaign for justice following the murder of her daughters, has joined us as a Visiting Fellow. So too has Dr Louise Newson, the expert in the menopause who advised on Davina McCall’s campaigning programmes which resulted in 500,000 more women in the UK going onto HRT, Ade Adepitan, the presenter, Paralympian and campaigner for people with disabilities, and Katy Hessel, British art historian, broadcaster, writer, curator and author of the best-selling The Story of Art without Men. Among our new Honorary Fellows are Tate Director Maria Balshaw, and Courtauld Institute of Art Director and College alumna Dr Deborah Swallow. Professor Michael Meredith of the British Antarctic Survey and Professor John Whittaker, Director of the MRC Biostatistics Unit, have joined us as Fellows. Such inspiring people.

In this edition of The Dolphin, we celebrate our students’ and Fellows’ successes, but we think it’s also important to talk to you about some of the challenges our students face.

We want to encourage more students from underrepresented minority groups including Muslims from British Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Somali backgrounds to come to Cambridge. Here, our outgoing student Aliza Zafar talks with admirable openness about challenges she faced in being in a religious minority in Cambridge, but she also points to some of the advantages for her of being at Murray Edwards.

Aliza also says she needed more help in making the transition from Cambridge to school and more help with essay writing. It’s because of this sort of useful feedback that we decided to double-down on the Gateway programme. But it was great to read that she felt she received good support in thinking about her career and feels she will be part of our community all her life.

I was also filled with admiration when I arrived here when I met some of our fifteen postgraduate students who combine their studies with motherhood. Two past postgraduate students with children write here of what a struggle their time in Cambridge was. My dream is to one day be able to provide family accommodation on-site. One for our 70th anniversary fundraising in 2024 I think!

Over the next year, we will be informing you of more developments. I know you will be especially interested as we develop our new wellbeing service and our Policy Centre for the Wellbeing of Young Women and Girls gets up.
and running. And we are also working on our plans for new groups linking students and alumnae with the same interests. We are planning a special season of events in the autumn celebrating Murray Edwards Women in Science and Engineering so look out for news as the plans take shape.

Alumnae are invited to put themselves forward to join the New Hall Society Committee. If you are interested, please complete the nomination form which can be found on the alumnae pages of the website. Voting takes place in February with the results announced at the AGM – part of the New Hall Society International Day/International Women’s Day events on Saturday 4 March 2023. I hope many of you will be able to join us for this annual celebration of inspiring talks and social events.

We are keen to hear the news in your lives to feature in next New Hall Society Review which will be part of the next issue of Dolphin magazine in the new year. Please email us your news and high-quality photos to newhallsociety@murrayedwards.cam.ac.uk.

As always, do send me your ideas and your views on our communications with you. I am keen to do a feature ‘Like Mother, Like Daughter’ after finding out by chance that we have at least two alumnae whose daughters came to Murray Edwards. But maybe it should be called ‘Like Mother, Unlike Daughter’ as I know only too well from my own daughter that daughters don’t necessarily appreciate being likened to their mothers!

Dorothy Byrne
What is your research?
My work involves taking a prototype device, previously developed by Dr Bale, that measures brain activity using only near infrared light. The device measures the change of concentration of oxygenated and deoxygenated blood in the brain as well as biomarkers of metabolism. This tells us where the brain is actually using the oxygen to create the energy that powers the brain activity. Creating this device is significant because we can then measure brain activity in a non-invasive way, in intensive care units, outside of hospitals or for vulnerable people who wouldn’t normally be suitable for invasive methods.

Devices that measure these changes already exist but not in a wearable device form. This device makes functional brain monitoring more affordable and accessible to a far wider range of patients and researchers.

Where did you do your undergraduate degree and what did you study?
I graduated in Physics from Durham University, then worked in London for four years as a Technical Engineer at the Space Magnetometer Laboratory (SML) at Imperial College London. The SML is part of the Space and Atmospheric Physics Group. They design and build precise, accurate and radiation tolerant magnetometers - measures magnetic field strength - for space missions. I worked with people from all over the world including those at NASA.

What made you want to get into this area of research?
I wanted to help people and make a difference in my work. I was interested in science from a young age and I always loved finding out how things work. To me, science helps to explain “the puzzles of life” and make sense of the world around us.

What do you think of Murray Edwards College?
I love the gardens, especially being able to grow things and pick the vegetables. I lived in Canning & Eliza and really enjoy the great MCR space. I am the LGBT rep for the MCR Committee.

How is Murray Edwards College different from other colleges?
I find the college friendlier and more supportive. It’s highly beneficial to be in a college that focuses on women’s learning and their opportunities for the future. I really feel that at Murray Edwards, women can stand out, be heard and thrive. It’s a place where women make space for each other to be heard.

What do you study?
I am a first year PhD student studying Biomedical Optics and Engineering, which is part of the NeuroOptics Lab led by Dr Gemma Bale. I am also the PhD Rep for Cambridge University Women in Engineering Society.
What do you do when a global pandemic jeopardises your year abroad?

If you’re Martha Bevan, who has just graduated from Murray Edwards with a starred first in History and Russian, you improvise. Martha managed to squeeze just 90 days in Moscow before she had to fly back to Britain - narrowly avoiding being stranded in Russia as the country locked down.

“I remember landing at Heathrow and finding all these messages on my phone saying, ‘the borders have shut - are you stranded?’”

Unable to travel to Russia, Martha put together her own studies in Cambridge – doing a daily online language course for 4 or 5 hours, taking advantage of Russian networks in Cambridge and seeking out Russian-speaking friends for walks. It was a test of her initiative.

“It helped that I was engaged in the subject,” she says. “I read widely. I developed my own niche interests. Though I lost opportunities to travel around Russia, I was eventually able to spend three months in Odessa, Ukraine last summer.”

Ukraine – before the Russian invasion – opened up new opportunities for Martha.

“Odessa is such a sunny, upbeat city and its literature reflects its satirical, cosmopolitan nature. So different from Moscow. Or the gloom and death of Dostoyevsky. It’s a port city that some have compared to Liverpool. There had been a large Jewish community so there are Yiddish as well as French influences. And its origins were Turkish.”

“It gave me a fresh perspective on the Russian-speaking world. Language is such a contested area, and you begin to understand the cultural ambiguities in Ukraine.”

What’s remarkable is that before she came to Murray Edwards in 2018, Martha had never studied Russian at all. But having spent much of her early life in Belgium, she was used to learning languages, speaking Dutch, French and English and learning Spanish at school.

“It was the history that attracted me to the language, I had been interested in Stalin and the Soviet Union. Now I have a fascination with other periods of Russian history.”

“It was bold to do Russian from scratch. But I felt well-supported by the College. I had a wonderful Director of Studies, Rachel Polonsky, who was so encouraging and supportive.”

“The Cambridge course offers opportunities to follow individual interests. In the material culture course, for example, it was fascinating to apply methodologies to different periods of Russian history.”

Martha grew up with three brothers – she smiles at the idea that this may be why she appreciated being at an all-women’s college.

“A teacher had been to Murray Edwards and recommended it to me. When I came to the Open Day, I found it friendly with a strong modern language community. It was also quieter, away from the tourists. And close to the athletics track.”

MARThA BEvAN

aTHLEtE aNd RUSSIANIST
Athletics was one way Martha escaped the pressure of academic work. In her final year she became Women’s Captain of the Cambridge Athletic Club.

“I’ve done athletics since I was 10. It was so important, especially during Covid when we couldn’t meet up with others. I looked forward to going to the track.”

She was originally a heptathlete – now she concentrates on the javelin and is ranked in the British Universities Top 15.

“Doing sport helped me to cope with the pressure of work. It feeds into my academic work too – helps mental preparation, makes me organise my time, not to mention the post-workout high.”

In addition to athletics, Martha worked on the Varsity newspaper where she pursued her love of writing. More recently she was president of the May Week event at Murray Edwards.

“I had to oversee the committee organising a high-energy garden party for 1,300 people.

Five hours of daytime entertainment with two stages, food, drink, security. It was great fun.”

Martha believes very strongly that there is a role for an all-women’s college in 2022.

“It’s not that it’s a softer, gentler environment. I see it more as an academic community for women.”

“We have lectures and supervisions with men. But it offers us a platform, a forum for women to eat together and discuss ideas together. Some women can lack confidence. It offers a space in which women can discuss women’s issues.”

“In the College Art Collection, you have the visibility of women’s work. The presence of female voices.”

“I don’t mean we just see things from a woman’s perspective – but it’s an opportunity to unite women’s experiences. The College does bring out the diversity of the female voice.”

“It’s not a cloistered environment. It’s not an all-girls school. You will meet guys. There will be interaction. But it’s the best of both worlds. It provides an oasis for women.”

Martha singled out aspects of the College that were particularly thoughtful.

“It’s a lot less toxically competitive than some of the other colleges. Cooperation is encouraged. There’s good welfare support. During the exam season the library staff would serve coffee and tea at 11, there would be gardening workshops and so on. There was real concern for our welfare.”

She thinks an all-women’s college can be good preparation for a gender-unequal world.

“It helps you to be more confident in yourself as an individual. You are yourself, you’re not just the only woman in the room.”

“Don’t compromise. Aim higher, be bold, be confident, strive for excellence.”
It’s an indication of how far Cambridge was from Aliza Zafar’s ambitions at school that when her psychology teacher suggested she apply for Oxbridge, Aliza misheard it as “Uxbridge.”

“I thought, why on earth would I want to go and study in west London? I was confused. Then I realised what she meant,” says Aliza, who has just graduated from Murray Edwards with a BA in Psychology.

Her teacher’s encouragement proved critical in a personal as well as an academic way. At that time Aliza was trying to come to terms with the death at 36 of her beloved sister Aisha after a long struggle with cancer.

“Because of the age difference, Aisha was like a second mother to me. We did everything together. We were exceptionally close. I’d spend all my holidays visiting Belfast where she lived and worked.”

Before her sister’s diagnosis, Aliza was studying A levels and had plans to study medicine. Her sister had even bought her a kidney necklace because she knew Aliza was interested in being a kidney doctor.

The news that her sister had an inoperable brain tumour was devastating. As Aisha’s condition deteriorated, Aliza describes losing her enthusiasm for medicine, and turning to religion.

“I prayed for her. The last time my sister saw me was when I was wearing a headscarf at the hospice. I decided that is how I would remain.”

Aliza arrived at Murray Edwards in 2019 to study psychology. But Cambridge was a huge culture shock and adjustment proved tricky.

“Emotionally Aliza had a very tough time in her first year, dealing with her grief. “I thought I could move forward after my sister’s death. But it really affected me in those first few months. I felt she died with the guilt of my not having fulfilled my dreams of being a doctor.”

Aliza withdrew into herself and regrets that she didn’t take advantage of the religious societies at Cambridge.

She was also dismayed by the drinking culture at university.

“If you’re not engaging in that, it’s quite difficult to find others. There were only a couple of us doing psychology at College so there was no one to walk to lectures with.”

College wore the hijab. There were five or six Muslims in my first year and not many more by the time I left.”
“It was a very low time. I was making a big shift. Academically I found it hard to adjust to what was expected of me. It was hard to get used to a new way of writing essays. I had six sessions with the Gateway programme on essay writing, but it wasn’t enough. At school we had focused on the textbook rather than critical thinking.”

“I did three subjects – social anthropology, psychology and politics – that seemed to require three different styles of essay writing. It wasn’t until the end of my third year that one of my supervisors took one of my essays and went through it line by line to show me how to improve it. That was so valuable.

Looking back, I think it would have been useful if more had been available to help with the transition.”

She believes being at an all-women’s college was an important factor in getting her through.

“I didn’t know Murray Edwards was all-women until my interview. I was really glad when I got here. It meant that I didn’t have to wear my scarf all the time. I could go to the library without having to wear it. I felt free. I was really happy. I felt at home,” she says.

“I was pleasantly surprised that the food at College was Halal. It was labelled so you didn’t need to ask. That was so nice. You never felt discriminated against. You could eat at formals confidently.”

Joining the Pakistani Society and the Islamic Society also helped Aliza to settle in.

“Cambridge can feel daunting,” she says. “You don’t feel you fit in. You say to yourself, ‘Here I am - an hour from London - and there’s no one here who looks like me.’ ”

“Cambridge as a whole, could work on its diversity. I can speak about the lack of diversity now. I suppose I could have resolved it if I’d been more open in my first year, but I had blocked off my feelings. I’ve learned that with grief, you can’t move on, you have to learn to live with it.”

British Muslims are still in the minority at Cambridge, especially those from British Pakistani or Bangladeshi communities. Murray Edwards wants to encourage them to come to the College so, in Aliza’s opinion, what sort of things must change for that to happen?

“I must say that my teacher made the difference. She encouraged me to apply. I think many people aren’t aware that there are all-female colleges. Greater awareness among the communities might make a difference. There’s a big fear of girls moving out and some parents might be less reluctant to let them go if they knew it was all-women.”

“Aliza’s father was born in the Punjab and moved to Pakistan after Partition. In 1969 he moved to England followed by her mother a few years later. Aliza is the first person in her family to go to university.

“My father always emphasised education. He believed that education can fulfil dreams.”

What advice would Aliza give to young Muslim women who are thinking of applying to Murray Edwards?

“She was amazing. She really understood my family circumstances, what was happening outside of College, how I was under pressure. She was really helpful.”

During the interview, the 22-year-old was sitting at home in London surrounded by ‘Welcome Home’ balloons. But she won’t be there for long. In September she embarked on a five-year medical degree at Queens University, Belfast – a place that holds many memories for her.

“I’ve no regrets. I just realised that I didn’t want psychology to be my field. Now I know about the work-life balance I think I can deal with it. Whatever happens, I am definitely taking weekends off in Belfast.”
Where did you do your degree?

I moved from India to undertake an undergraduate degree in history at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES), a department at UCL.

I have always loved art and considered it to be a language of its own. I took history of art courses alongside my history programme, which informed a better understanding of historical events.

I decided to pursue a History of Art Masters programme, also at UCL. In the process, I realised how Indian voices are so marginalised in colonial history. As an Indian, I wanted to address this and found that art was such a powerful tool for recovering those voices.

Where did your interest in art begin?

It was from my parents. They really encouraged me to use art as a way of expressing what I was feeling and what I was going through.

Can you tell me a bit more about your research?

I moved to India at a young age, so at first, I used it as a way of documenting my personal experience of moving to another country. As I grew older, I realised that art could uncover injustices in the past and the present. It can provide an interesting and critical insight into politics, government and power. So, it became a career.

I should start with the Clive Collection. It contains an assortment of mostly South Asian objects that were accumulated by two generations of the Clive family in the 18th and the 19th century. The Clive family played a significant role in establishing colonial rule over the Indian subcontinent. As a result, these objects are intertwined in the histories of aggressive encounters and conflicts between the British East India Company and South Asian Empires, such as the Mughal Empire.

What I do in the Clive Collection is focus on provenance research. This means exploring the history and the social dynamics around how the Clive family were able to acquire the objects in the Collection. The Collection includes arms and armour, textiles, paintings, jewellery, to name a few objects. But arguably the most discussed object in the Collection is Tipu Sultan’s gold tiger finial.

The Clive Collection currently has four provenance categories: gift, loot, purchase and unknown. The problem with these categories is that they are dominated and restricted by European narratives and terminologies, which informs a racialised rhetoric of Empire.

My research aims to challenge those provenance categories and move beyond European discourses and interpretations by placing the objects back into their cultural and political context. In doing so, I am trying to recover South Asian agency in the Clive Collection in both the past and the present.
Was there a lot of research of the Clive Collection from the Indian side and how was it documented?

Yes. For instance, post-partition Indian historians wrote books and articles explaining that the objects had been taken unfairly. However, their work was not included and most likely discounted as illegitimate when the Clive Museum was established. For the most part, European accounts that glorified Clive as a ‘war hero’ and justified the actions of Empire were privileged and fed into the official interpretation of the Clive Collection.

I am finding ways to address the legitimate claims of those Indian historians but it is particularly challenging in the current political climate. Recent discussions from professors and historians of colour have highlighted the difficulties and negative reactions they have faced speaking about Empire and its injustices. Their experiences are at the forefront of my mind when I’m doing my research. But their determination to fight for this important work is also what fuels me to continue.

What are the real-world applications or implications of your research?

My PhD project is a collaborative doctoral award with the National Trust and the University of Cambridge. My research feeds into their ongoing aim to address colonial histories in their collections, and to be ever more inclusive.

I hope that my research will also provide theoretical frameworks and tools for other museums to address provenance questions in their colonial collections, so it’s not just restricted to the Clive Collection. It can be carried forward.

How did you come to work with the National Trust?

I applied for a PhD and the project was advertised by OOC DTP (Open-Oxford-Cambridge AHRC Doctoral Training Partnership), to re-examine the Clive Collection. After my Master’s, I focused on creating platforms and open forums for untold or overlooked histories to be uncovered in museum and heritage collections across the UK. So, I thought that this was a perfect fit for me and I was fortunate enough to get it.

The work is going to be completed in 2024 as the pandemic altered the timeline drastically, but my cohort has been incredibly supportive and has given me that additional time and guidance.

What did you think of Murray Edwards during your PhD?

I thought it was incredibly empathetic and very supportive. There have been so many instances when the College has really gone out of their way to make me feel comfortable. What I really appreciate is that they’re genuinely interested in my work and my life at Cambridge. They’re so excited about what I’m doing, which makes me equally excited.

It was very unexpected. When you apply to Cambridge, you never really knew what colleges are like, and you don’t necessarily know what role that college plays in your life until you are there. Especially when you’re doing a PhD, as I had read about how PhDs are incredibly lonely experiences of mostly being locked away in a room with your books and doing your own research, but it hasn’t felt like that. I have felt welcome, included and appreciated at Murray Edwards.

Is Murray Edwards different from other colleges in your experience?

I think the College’s distinguishing feature is that they make the welfare of their students their first priority. When I started my PhD at the beginning of the pandemic, it would’ve been easy for me to have been forgotten during that chaotic time. But the students, the tutors and the President, all worked hard to make sure that I had that support, and they continue to do.

How has the College continued to help post-pandemic?

Now that world is getting back to “normal”, the College has shifted from asking about my PhD and navigating Covid life, to asking me what I’m going to do next and how can they help me in the future? That’s been wonderful for me. It doesn’t feel like this relationship’s going to end just because my PhD ends. It feels like it’s going to be a lifelong relationship and the support doesn’t just end because I’ve got my PhD and I’ve left Cambridge.
When Dr Miranda Griffin talks about her research, it’s hard not to feel the thrill of forensic scholarly work and share her sense of excitement at handling original documents.
"I was in Paris recently and spent time examining a manuscript, touching this thick heavy book made in the 13th century, right there in front of me. It's very moving. To be in the presence of this thing, this artefact, that has been carefully illustrated and hundreds of years later I get to look at it in a library. It's really exciting. You get a sense of contact with the past."

The Assistant Professor of Medieval French Literature and Fellow at Murray Edwards has recently returned to Parisian libraries to pursue her studies. Post-pandemic, she has once more found herself poring over documents, inspecting the vellum and looking out for fragments of text in unusual places.

"Digitisation was very useful during lockdown. There's no doubt it makes these precious works so much more accessible for people who aren't specialists or who don't have to go through the arduous process of proving their credentials in a Paris library. But you sometimes need to see the original. You can still learn so much by just examining the actual artefact. To see what is missing. Many originals had gold on them – they were illuminated manuscripts – and were therefore valuable to collectors. So you can see where images may have been cut out and how that's been dealt with. I could see for instance where a gap had been carefully patched."

A sense of adventure often characterises Miranda's recollections of her scholarly work.

While at St Catharine's – where she was the first female Senior Tutor in the college’s history – she recalls what happened when her curiosity was stirred by some very unusual writing in the margin of an original document she had come across in the library.

"With the help of the librarian, we put the document under ultraviolet light. The writing in the margin derived from the 18th century, and it turned out to be the birthdays of the writer's children. From this we were able to identify the author. It was really fun."

Miranda is currently at work on her latest book - Imagined Landscapes in Medieval French Literature. What interests her is how the representation of landscape in the Middle Ages differs from modern concepts.

"Landscape is more than just a backdrop. It's another character that has its own effect. For instance, the Song of Roland is set in the Pyrenees when the French are in retreat from Spain. The stories are all anchored in a particular landscape. I'm not a historian or an archaeologist. These aren't accurate depictions. Often the author hasn't even visited the place in question. But it doesn’t matter. What interests me is how the stories are shaping their own landscape and creating a sense of place."

In a recent presentation at College Miranda talked about the significance of a medieval manuscript kept at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal in Paris.

"It's an interesting manuscript in the way it depicts time. It seems that there are pages missing that would have covered the story of Creation. So it begins with a Calendar, written in 1267, and the first images show the story of Adam and Eve. That is, it starts with human, organised time rather than cosmological time. And the images of Adam and Eve depict them at the point when they have acquired fig leaves. In other words, at the very moment when they have acquired a sense of shame about their bodies."

Such texts are indicative of how people saw the world differently in the Middle Ages, she says. "The European Middle Ages are sometimes used by unsavoury political groups to talk about racial purity. They create a false narrative. So it’s instructive to look at the texts."

"The crusading ideology and iconography for example are used wilfully by ignorant groups. Symbols from a long time ago are distorted."

"I impress upon my students how it's important to look at the Middle Ages on their own terms. With a sense of openness and enquiry."

Miranda grew up in Wiltshire and studied at a comprehensive school before coming to what was then New Hall in the 1990s as an undergraduate student of French and German. What does she make of Murray Edwards today?

"There’s been such a transformation. Physically, there’s more building work. More accommodation. The entrance used to be hard to find, you had to go around the bins. Now it’s so welcoming and lovely."

"In the 1990s the college had something of an inferiority complex. Now there's a real sense of pride and a celebration of its difference. A diverse experience. Murray Edwards has set its own rules from the beginning."

"An all-women's college has its strength and its challenges. There are questions about gender-based places when gender is understood as non-binary that require honest and thoughtful discussions."

As one would expect of someone with her expertise in landscapes, she is struck by the sense of space.

"What I now appreciate at Murray Edwards are the buildings – they’re so striking and modern; the garden – it’s a little paradise – planted so carefully with vegetables and herbs. It’s a place where you can sit. It’s not formal or cordoned off. It’s to be enjoyed. And the art. I realised I’d spent so much of my time in places surrounded by paintings of men or by men, all of them white."

Post-pandemic, her life at Murray Edwards has become even more active. In October she took on the role of Praelector - on top of her own research, family life and her teaching duties in the department and in the college.

"It's all part of the challenges and privileges of the job. I don't get bored."

"I decided I'd like to take on the role of Praelector as it's a role that celebrates students' achievements. One of the things I found saddest about lockdown was that students couldn't celebrate their graduations with their friends and family. It's been a genuine delight to be part of those celebrations starting again – although this isn't without its complications as we try to plan celebrations for two years' worth of graduating classes."

The Praelector is also a rather risky role in that it carries certain responsibilities for student transgressions.

"I'm responsible for any infractions of their dress code or mistakes in the Latin spoken during the ceremony. If it's not in order, I'm told that I could be fined a bottle of port. Though I don't know who's supposed to get the port."

"Luckily, it's never likely to be enforced as Murray Edwards students are incredibly well behaved."
THOMAS COPE

ADVENTURES IN DEMENTIA
But Dr Thomas Cope, consultant neurologist and Fellow of Murray Edwards, says his team’s research has successfully explained why people living with all kinds of dementia struggle with change.

The findings, published in the Journal of Neuroscience in March 2022, show that the reason relates to damage in a key part of the brain called the Multiple Demand Network.

“It was known that dementia patients couldn’t cope with change. What was new about our research was why this happened,” says Dr Cope.

As a clinician, Dr Cope sees people with much rarer types of dementia besides the most common form, Alzheimer’s disease.

“What is common to all is the inability to cope with change. Whether it’s the dishwasher breaking down, the shop closing or whatever it might be, delicate routines collapse explosively if something goes wrong.”

Dr Cope and his colleagues set out to find out why this was happening. Which brings us to Planet Earth. Dr Cope says the film choice was essential.

“We were asking people – including dementia patients - to watch something for 15 minutes. In the past we had tried cartoon movies like Kung Fu Panda but they were too exciting and variable for our purposes. We felt Planet Earth was engaging and calming and didn’t need sound.”

While the volunteers were watching the film, their brain activity was recorded by a highly sophisticated device called a magnetoencephalography machine.

“It’s very precise. It measures the magnetic fields produced by electric currents in the brain. There are only ten of these machines in the UK. Fortunately, Cambridge has one of them.”

Dr Cope says it was important to use a machine of this calibre.

“People might be familiar with MRI scans but for the purpose of this experiment, we needed something that was much quicker. MRI scans are detailed but they are slow, producing a picture of the brain every few seconds. Magnetoencephalography machines can produce a thousand pictures every second.”

The changing beeps provoked two measurable brain reactions: first, after one tenth of a second, that there had been a beep. And second, after another tenth of a second, that the beep had changed. The second response was much smaller among those with dementia.

What the recordings showed was that in healthy volunteers, the hearing system transmitted information about the changing beeps to four areas at the front and back of the brain known as the Multiple Demand Network. The network interpreted the information and informed the hearing system when and in what way the environment had changed.

In people with dementia however, the data suggested their slower response to change was due to damage in the Multiple Demand Network. Although different dementias affected different parts of the network in different ways, they all damaged at least one part of it.

In this way Dr Cope’s research identified the network’s vital role in linking the parts of the brain that help to cope with change.

“The Multiple Demand Network has evolved in human beings, and it is what differentiates our large brains from those of other animals. It deals with general intelligence. What we showed was that all these four regions are involved when the brain reacts to change. When any part is damaged, such as by dementia, it means that the brain finds it harder to evaluate changing circumstances. This leads to poorer recognition of the unexpected.”

So how might dementia patients benefit from these findings?

“These findings allow us to explain patients’ difficulties to them and their families, and to provide evidence-based suggestions for how to help,” says Dr Cope. “When you are caring for someone with dementia, it is important to give very clear signposting. To alert them when their situation is about to change and to reinforce what is about to happen with advance warning.”

“There is currently no treatment for the underlying condition. But what this allows us to do is to explain what is happening and why it is common in all types of dementia.”

In the absence of any cure for dementia, Dr Cope believes his research can increase our knowledge of how the brain malfunctions.

“I am fascinated by the brain. And by how it works. And by how it goes wrong. By understanding it, I can help patients and their relatives understand what is happening to them. Tell them what to expect. Where to find resources and, where available, medicine to help the symptoms.”

When he’s not seeing patients as a consultant neurologist or carrying out research with the MRC Cognition and Brain Science Unit or the University’s Department of Clinical Neurosciences, Dr Cope has teaching and direction of studies responsibilities at Murray Edwards. Since 2018 he has been an Official Fellow – having been a Bye fellow since 2014.

“I love Murray Edwards. It’s a friendly, approachable place. Open, modern, forward-thinking and the fellowship works collegiately.”

It’s a role he values for its opportunities to teach and be part of the community.

“I have two daughters. I know there’s still a place for an all-women’s college in 2022. It remains more difficult for women in employment and, in this environment, education has a role in levelling the playing field.”
The current exam season found her working her way through 90 exam papers and eight dissertations. On top of that, she’s been pursuing her own research – furthering her expertise in Chinese ethnic communities in Southeast Asia – and co-editing The Historical Journal.

Yet one is as likely to find Rachel’s name on a blog or a literary review or a documentary film as a learned journal. The Associate Professor in Modern East Asian History believes the dissemination of academic work to different and non-academic audiences is very important and that language holds the key.

“I prefer to widen audiences and I believe in developing different genres. Academics use internalist language which can be very problematic. What’s central to the way PhDs are taught is this use of internalist language - footnotes, caveat it, make the arguments unimpeachable. It is fantastic training. And I came through that process myself.”

After undergraduate studies at Warwick, Rachel completed an MPhil in Historical Studies and a PhD in History at St Catharine’s College, Cambridge before taking up a postdoctoral fellowship at the Center for History and Economics at Harvard as Prize Fellow in Economics, Politics and History. She says blogging was taking off around the time she embarked on her doctorate and that’s when she decided to start a blog of her own.

“I think of blogging as an additional step in communicating. Writing about any subject deepens your knowledge about it. It’s also a challenge because you cannot make assumptions about your reader’s knowledge.”

Rachel has characterised blogs as “modern salons” where ideas can be introduced with an immediacy of engagement and exchange with the public.

She’s aware this is not an attitude shared by the entire historical profession. In 2010 she wrote about scholars baulking “at the very idea of a blog – these rough repositories where what ought to be private is made unconscionably public, where not every word or idea has been refereed or thrashed out with the lucid finality of an edited journal article. In blogs, academic thinking seems to be caught in the act of undressing; half-formed ideas whip round and gasp, clutching at awkward sentences to cover their nakedness.”

Rachel argues however that blogging requires the same level of care and substantial research as any other output.

Rachel’s current research involves a re-thinking of the Chinese diaspora and migration in Southeast Asia through a critical reappraisal of the work of the influential Chinese sociologist, Chen Da.

Her forthcoming article - The patriarchy of diaspora: Race fantasy and gender blindness in Chen Da’s studies of the Nanyang Chinese – questions his research methods and conclusions about the Chinese diaspora. She examines the limitations of his work, highlighting what she calls his “systemic blind spots of race and gender.”

By tracing the genesis of his research and his travels through Southeast Asia, Rachel shows how, at each stage, Chen’s investigations, academic networks, connections he made with his local informants and even his collaborations with his principal translator, offered him an understanding of the world beyond a patriarchal, patriotic Chinese diaspora that he declined to explore fully.

Why does Rachel think Chen Da had such reluctance, such “blind spots”?

“Like many male scholars at the time, he didn’t talk to a single woman in the three months he spent doing research in 1934. But he was a product of his time and social contexts, and part of the work of a historian is to recover those contexts with empathy as well as empirical rigour.”
Rachel says she is not happy with the term “diaspora” and believes it should be used with caution.

“It’s a rather crude term, meaning ‘orientation to a homeland.’ Approximately 60 to 70 percent of ethnic Chinese communities live in Southeast Asia but the reality is that many of them do not see themselves as wanting to return to China.”

Rachel adopts a similar scepticism towards the term “nation state” in the context of Southeast Asia.

“There are better ways of framing history. The “nation-state” frame leaves out a lot of complexity, particularly in East Asia, where those borders are relatively new and still highly contested. For instance, migration is not something that is easily studied within a nation-state framework. Archives are largely products of nation-states, and migrants aren’t as easily visible in such archives, since by definition they move in and out of them. So, writing about migration involves looking at lots of different archives: in the place of origin, in the means of transport and in the new destination and so on.”

Alternatives of writing non-national histories have opened up a lot of new avenues for research. You can write the history of a specific village, or follow a particular commodity, such as tortoiseshell, sago or salt. Adding such approaches to the historian’s toolbox might better capture the historical realities of mobility and movement as a longstanding, central feature of human societies.

“Interconnections are what matter in history. The term ‘nation state’ – it’s not out of favour, it’s just that historians are more aware of its limitations.”

Rachel’s writings often revolve around what she calls the complex architecture of Asian societies. In one of her recent literary reviews - “Home is Everywhere” published in the Mekong Review of Books - she examines a memoir by the Chinese historian Wang Gungwu in which he recalls the intricate cultural and plurilingual milieu of his youth in British Malaya.

“It is a milieu I know vividly from my own youth,” she wrote, “so utterly familiar to me that I had to write a book about it to truly know its strangeness.”

Rachel’s book - Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia, published in 2016 - dealt with Malaysia through the prism of a multilingual state. It’s a world she understands.

Born in Kuala Lumpur, Rachel grew up in an urban middle class society where she was exposed to several languages.

“As a child, I might speak to a street hawker in Cantonese, Malay with my friends, Mandarin or English at school. I thought it was normal. I took it for granted. I only realised it wasn’t when I came to Britain in 2004 and encountered a monolingual society.”

Language wasn’t the only issue. Rachel found British food a literal shock to the system - “I developed an insane number of food allergies as I adjusted to a dairy diet” - and the drinking culture made life socially difficult. “I was reserved, and didn’t tend to use alcohol to socialise, which at the time made me a bit of an outlier, and excluded me from a lot of British university social life. But I bonded through music with two close friends who I met at the beginning of my studies.”

Though she writes about displacement, Rachel’s own life has been fairly settled for the last nine years at Murray Edwards College.

“It is brilliant. It widens opportunities for women and empowers them for the world outside. It’s really deepened my commitment to gender history. In fact, it’s sharpened my convictions.”

“The College came into being with a mission to address fundamental gender imbalances that prevented women from entering higher education. There have been major shifts since then: women no longer face the same impediments to entry to Cambridge, and the College is evolving rapidly as a result. I admire that it is asking important existential questions about its own role, and is thinking hard about new kinds of gender identifications as well as ongoing barriers of class, race and opportunity in higher education.”

She believes there are still conventional obstacles facing women that the College is helping to overcome, however.

“Women are still under-represented in the workplace - there’s a pay gap and so on. But the College puts its money where its mouth is. It connects women with employment and supports them as they enter a still gender-unequal world.”
COMBINING STUDY WITH MOTHERHOOD
COMBINING STUDY WITH MOTHERHOOD

JANE CARMICHAEL’S STORY

I found the idea of an all-women’s college appealing. It was a friendly, nurturing environment.

Jane Carmichael - Cape Cod, October 2022
American. Aged 45. A mother of two young children. At matriculation in 2002, Jane Carmichael was, in her own words, “an exotic beast.”

“I think people in general just didn’t know what to make of me, so they treated me as an exception to all the rules.”

Jane arrived at Cambridge to study law after a successful career as a management consultant. Her children, aged two and six, lived with her and her husband in a village six miles south of Cambridge.

Through her husband, who ran the University Development Office, Jane got to know the then College President Anne Lonsdale who suggested she apply to New Hall.

“I found the idea of an all-women’s college appealing. It was a friendly, nurturing environment. Not weighed down by hundreds of years of tradition. And in any event, there were always men around.”

“I wasn’t a typical young person discovering the world. I didn’t engage much with the social life at College. I already had a husband and children. I didn’t have to go out and find a boyfriend,” she laughs.

But what it did mean was that she and the family had to be highly organised and follow a strict routine.

Childcare involved complicated logistics. A taxi service would pick up her son from school and take him to an after-school club, close to her daughter’s nursery. Both kids needed to be picked up by 6 every day.

“I managed to fit most of my reading and essay-writing in around lectures during the day, so didn’t have to do too much work in the evenings.”

“If the kids got sick, I stayed home to look after them, but this didn’t happen very much. My supervisors were very supportive and understanding. Many were parents themselves, so were aware of the challenges.

The family got used to the schedule though Jane concedes that exams were particularly stressful.

“During exam terms my husband did all the childcare, and I rented a room in college so I could revise in peace, only going home at the weekends.”

Jane had already been working in a high-pressured environment as a management consultant so was used to organising her time to focus on her studies. On reflection she doesn’t feel she had to compromise unduly.

“It was less of a problem as a student than it was when I was working. Cambridge, by comparison, was predictable.”

Because Jane already had an undergraduate degree from an American university, she was able to complete the BA in law in two years rather than the usual three.

“My daughter came to my graduation ceremony aged three. She says she’s very proud of me. I guess her feelings were mixed – she liked the fact I was independent and working, but she was also aware that she was one of the few children not being collected by ‘mummy.”

Looking back, Jane says there is no doubt what would have improved the quality of her life as a student with children.

“It would have helped to have had more support with finding childcare. The University Nursery had a long waiting list, and there was no other central support mechanism, such as a data bank or referral service, to help. Otherwise, I was fortunate to have a very supportive partner, and enough money to afford full-time childcare –once I found it!”
AMY GRAHAM’S STORY

It’s important for mothers to be visible in College.

COMBINING STUDY WITH MOTHERHOOD

Amy and Theadora, 2022
Amy Graham would never have contemplated combining motherhood with study while she was at Cambridge. For one thing, she’s seen how difficult it has been at Sheffield Hallam University where she is currently finishing off her PhD and trying to raise her two-year-old daughter as a single parent.

"Cambridge is so intense, with high expectations. The nine-week terms put huge pressures on people. I had at least two deadlines every week. I can’t imagine how it would work with a child. At least doing a doctorate I have had more flexibility with my time. I set my own deadlines. So if my daughter is sick, I can look after her. In Cambridge there wouldn’t have been any leeway."

Amy was an architecture student at the then New Hall from 2007 to 2010. It wasn’t a particularly happy experience.

"My intellectual confidence was challenged at Cambridge. I joined a choir but I realise now that I worked too much. I was too wrapped up in work. One of the great benefits of having a child is that it has focused my mind. I have become more decisive. I have a limited time to study and I find I am super-organised."

After graduation she worked in various local museums before taking a job at Kingston that led to a Masters in Heritage Studies. She subsequently applied for a PhD funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council that took her to Sheffield Hallam.

"I came on the Megabus and without visiting Sheffield beforehand, I bought the first flat I saw. I loved the city. It was amazing. A green place. With solid, progressive instincts and independent retailers. I could walk to work. It was great."

Amy is studying the relationship between heritage and everyday life through a qualitative study of bus enthusiasts. "I’m interested in how time is framed. I’m exploring how, when you’re on a bus, time is heightened. You’re observant and engaged in the world in a different way. It’s an opportunity in everyday life when we are "in time." I’m looking at how bus enthusiasts relate to the historical past."

In the third year of her doctorate Amy was in an intense relationship and pregnant. It was a difficult time: the country was in the middle of lockdown and in April 2020 her father died. Her relationship struggled and ultimately failed. When the baby was five months old, Amy asked her partner to leave.

Life as a single mother has brought many challenges but there have been benefits.

"My supervisors have been incredibly supportive and the library staff seem to enjoy seeing a baby visit. My peers have been very supportive and kind."

In some ways lockdown helped her studies. She had assembled all the data she needed beforehand so could concentrate on writing her dissertation. Zoom meetings, sympathetic supervisors and a stipend for the doctorate also reduced the stress.

Amy breastfed her daughter and found the sleep-deprived nights unexpectedly good for her thinking. "I did my hard-thinking in the middle of the night. My supervisors commented on the energy in my writing."

Amy aims to complete her doctorate in the next few months. Her stipend has run out and she is currently living on her savings. Out of that she has to pay for her daughter to attend nursery 12 hours a week. She has no doubt what would improve the quality of life as a student with a child.

"Free or supported childcare. As I’m not earning or paying tax, I get no government help, which I would be eligible for if I was earning. So as a single mum on savings, I get less help than fairly affluent friends who are couples with two salaries."

Once she has finished her doctorate, Amy will be looking for a job in research or in the museum sector, ideally full-time, with some remote working and a flexible employer.

"The childcare costs pose a conundrum. If my daughter is in full-time nursery it will cost me about £1,000 a month and lots of post-graduate jobs are fairly short-term. Government help kicks in when a child is three, but if women want to work, it’s not good to be out of employment for a few years. It’s tough to get back into work with such a gap."

Based on her experience as a mother who studies, Amy thinks an on-site creche for children or bursaries for students to help with childcare would improve the situation.

"It’s important for mothers to be visible in College."

For all the challenges, Amy has no regrets about studying and having children.

"My relationship with my daughter is fantastic. And the PhD has allowed me time to think, to meet people, to write. Both have been a huge privilege."

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It was my husband who thought I should go to Cambridge. I thought it was a ridiculous idea.
Melanie Williams describes her years studying law at Cambridge as painful and ecstatic.

Ecstatic, because after years of little self-belief she says she discovered she had an intellect.

"I realised I could master something and have a proper tussle with the tutor. I loved asking the deep questions – what do we mean by a law?"

But it was painful because the then mother of two was parted from her young children.

"I cried every day on the phone to my husband."

Melanie became an undergraduate at the then New Hall from 1985 until 1988. Aged 27, she already had two daughters, aged three and one. A third daughter was born after graduation – she recalls doing her Finals with her bump wedged under the desk.

Melanie’s path to Cambridge wasn’t easy. She left school at 16 with few qualifications and did a typing course to find work.

“When I was 18 I met my husband who was a doctor. We got married and had a child. He told me I was very bright. It was my husband who thought I should go to Cambridge. I thought it was a ridiculous idea.”

After taking A levels at night school Melanie applied to an all-women’s college because she thought it would be a more nurturing environment and she succeeded in passing the entrance exam for New Hall.

"I felt very torn. My husband thought it would secure the children's future if I did it. My parents said, but what about these children? It never occurred to me – or them - that I could bring my kids with me. It was such a miraculous opportunity to go to Cambridge in the first place that I felt I couldn’t bargain."

"I had so much work. Essays. Seminars. I wasn’t aware of there being any provision for students with children. I can’t picture how it would have actually worked."

Melanie lived in New Hall all week and each weekend she got in her little car to drive the two and a half-hour journey home. If she was under pressure of work, she sometimes stayed in College for the weekend.

"If you see pictures of me at the time, I was barely six stone. I lost so much weight. In my first year I was convinced I was an imposter. I thought I would obviously fail so I relaxed. And actually I did well in my first year exams. Then I fell into a deep depression in my second year as I realised that I would now have to stay and finish the degree – and therefore I knew I would be leaving my kids. I picked up in the third year as by then I could see an end in sight."

Melanie credits her personal tutor, M.M. McCabe, with getting her through.

“She was excellent. I feel guilty for how much I leaned on her. I was in pieces in my second year in what I now know is a dissociated state. Always crying to her. I feel ashamed now.

She said if keeping you here means you coming and seeing me every day, then come and see me every day. My door is always open.”

After Cambridge, Melanie – who by then had three children - did a part time Master’s degree in English at the University of Sussex from 1989 to 1991.

“There, they had a creche. It felt revolutionary.”

Melanie went on to have a very successful career as a law lecturer, becoming a professor at the University of Swansea and head of department at the University of Exeter where she is now Professor Emerita. She is currently about to complete another Master’s degree, in psychotherapeutic practice.

“My Cambridge degree transformed my life. I never went to a May Ball. I’ve never been in a punt. But I don’t feel I missed out."

As for her children, she says her three daughters have told her how much they admire what she’s achieved.

“They’re all late developers. They say they’re all inspired by what I did.”
THE WOMEN’S ART COLLECTION

Going Back to the Past to Go Forward to the Future.

In April 2022, the College art collection officially reverted to its original name of The Women’s Art Collection. There were various reasons behind this decision. Firstly, we wanted to highlight the collection’s founding aim of promoting and celebrating women artists.
The continuing need for this was emphasised by a survey that we conducted on the proportion of women artists in UK museum collections, which revealed that on average only 7% of works in national museum collections are by women (at the National Gallery this figure is as low as 1% and at the National Galleries of Scotland – 2.8%).

The second reason is that it was complicated to explain why the collection still carried the name New Hall when the College had become Murray Edwards 14 years before. It became apparent that this was holding us back from becoming better known and giving our artists the recognition they deserve. And finally, we wanted to emphasise the significance of the collection on a national and international stage. The Collection is the largest of its kind in Europe, so it’s not just a women’s art collection, it’s THE women’s art collection. We were given the brilliant opportunity of collaborating with the London Art Fair as their ‘museum partner’ where we announced our new – or rather, old – name and showcased highlights from the Collection to a wider audience.

We could not anticipate how people would receive the news of the name change, but the response has been overwhelmingly and brilliantly positive. Many artists in the Collection thanked us for trying to better promote them. We were flooded with lovely comments (and congratulatory emojis) on our social media pages. The name change and survey were covered in articles in the BBC, the Sunday Times, Varsity and Radio 4’s The World Tonight. The display at the London Art Fair was mentioned in articles in the Financial Times and Artlyst. And our exhibition, What Lies Beneath: Women, Politics, Textiles, was recommended in the Guardian Saturday Magazine.

We hope to build on this excitement and enthusiasm as we move forward in various ways. We aim to build on the successes of our recent exhibitions and public programming by staging ever more ambitious events, for all to enjoy. We will continue to build and diversify the Collection by acquiring works of stellar quality, both by leading and more emerging artists. And last, but certainly not least, we will further embed the collection in the University and College’s teaching and cement its role as an academic resource for research on modern and contemporary art by women.

One of the highlights of the last few months has been the way that students have engaged with and supported the Collection. A grant from the Art Fund enabled us to employ four student Curatorial Assistants to work on the public programme for the textiles exhibition. They organised a bandana workshop, a Latin American art festival, an art therapy stitching session and a day-long conference on textile art, bringing hundreds of people into the College and unpacking some of the many layers behind women’s textiles practices.

Several Murray Edwards students volunteered at our London Art Fair display and spoke to visitors about their experience of living in an art collection. And 20 students participated in a portrait stencilling workshop with artists Jann Haworth and Liberty Blake as part of a major commission by the National Portrait Gallery. The portraits will become part of a seven-foot mural depicting 120 trailblazing women past and present that will be unveiled at the National Portrait Gallery next summer. I would recommend to everyone that they go and see it and look out for the portraits of Rosemary Murray, Jocelyn Bell Burnell and Amika George, among many others!
IZZY CANNON DE SOUSA DA CAMARA

VOLUNTEERING AT THE LONDON ART FAIR

The Women’s Art Collection was this year’s museum partner at the London Art Fair. It was a great opportunity to raise the profile of Murray Edwards, while simultaneously launching the change in the collection’s name – from New Hall Art Collection to the original, The Women’s Art Collection. I really enjoyed talking to people about the collection and how we, as students, interact with it. It was wonderful to hear how complimentary the visitors were about the collection and its importance in making women’s art visible and accessible. It was even too well received at times, with various people asking to buy the pieces on display!

The theme of the display was Myth-Making and Self-Fashioning. The late Dame Paula Rego’s painting, Inês de Castro, attracted a lot of attention and I appreciated the opportunity to talk to the public about the quite disturbing story behind the work. There was something for everyone; Gayle Chong Kwan’s photographs of food landscapes, for instance, were popular, with children finding them fascinating.

The display was right by the entrance so we had a great turnout – it was not a spot to be missed! It was a very exciting experience overall. I didn’t leave with a painting, but the Art Fair’s tote bag, emblazoned with the college’s name, was a nice compensation!
We were very sad to learn of the death of our Honorary Fellow Paula Rego whose work Ines de Castro is one of the favourites of students. In celebration of her life, we give you here the remarkable story of how that picture came to be.
With a glint in her eye, she said yes. I was thrilled. But she said she would set us some homework first. We had to find her a story, because she liked to work from fairy tale and narrative.

It's not everyone who can say they contributed to the genesis of a masterpiece, but Wendy Ayres-Bennett and Sarah Greaves can certainly make that claim.

The masterpiece in question is Ines de Castro, the magnificent painting by Dame Paula Rego that now adorns the walls of Murray Edwards College as part of its celebrated Women's Art Collection.

Paula Rego, the Portuguese-born visual artist known for her paintings and prints based on storybooks, died in June. Her work often reflected feminism, coloured by folk-themes from her native Portugal and Ines de Castro, painted in 2013, was no exception.

But what was unusual was that the inspiration for this painting came from the very College where the work now hangs.

In 2013 Wendy, Professor of French Philology and Linguistics, was then chair of the Women's Art Collection. Sarah, College Administrator & Art Registrar at Murray Edwards College, had been looking after the Collection since 2004.

Their extraordinary insight into the creativity of this great 20th century artist began with a lunch.

Paula Rego had been awarded an honorary fellowship by the College and Wendy sat next to her at the celebratory meal.

"We got on extremely well. She was good company. We talked about languages and art. It was a really pleasant occasion."

Paula already had links with the Women's Art Collection. The Collection included an etching donated by her soon after the Collection was established in 1986. It now holds over 600 works of modern and contemporary art, making it the largest of its kind in Europe.

"The College had written to leading female artists asking them whether they would like to loan or donate a work of art. We were pleasantly surprised when so many did. That's what makes it quite special. Nothing was purchased. It's indicative of how limited the opportunities were for women artists to display their work," says Wendy.

"Because I knew we already had the etching, I tentatively broached whether Paula would do a painting for us. With a glint in her eye, she said yes, I was thrilled. But she said she would set us some homework first. We had to find her a story, because she likely to work from fairy tale and narrative."

After lunch Wendy accompanied Paula on a tour of the Collection. She recalls how Paula was particularly taken by the Maggi Hambling painting, Gulf Women Prepare for War.

"It is a striking picture and the idea crystallised that the two works might sit well together. Paula asked us for the size of the Hambling."

Wendy appreciated how generous Paula's offer to do a picture would be for the College. She sent Paula the measurements of the Hambling and immediately set about her "homework."

"I got together 3 or 4 senior Fellows, including a couple of English Fellows, to come up with some ideas. We knew it had to be something with a strong narrative or fairy tale element, a legend or history."

They were aware that Paula had often drawn on literature and narratives of various kinds in her images. Her works include pieces inspired by Charlotte Brontë, Jean Rhys, Eça de Queirós, Jean Genet, Fernando de Rojas and children's fairy tales and nursery rhymes.

At the end of June 2013 Wendy emailed Paula a list of potential subjects: Christina Rossetti, Goblin Market, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Lolly Willowes; Charlotte Bronte, Villette and Scott O'Dell, Island of the Blue Dolphins.

"We thought of this particularly because the dolphin is one of the college's motifs."

Wendy's email to Paula continued: "Failing this, we wondered about picking up a Portuguese story. A colleague tells me that Ezra Pound makes reference to the story of Pedro and Inês. I wonder whether this is something you've already thought of?"

According to history, Ines, a Galician noblewoman, has an illicit affair with Pedro, the Crown Prince of Portugal. She is killed on the orders of the King. When Pedro succeeds to the throne, he has her killers put to death and proclaims that Ines had been his rightful queen. Legend holds that Pedro had his body exhumed after his coronation and had the court pay allegiance to her corpse.

"The tale of Pedro and Inês de Castro is a traditional story of forbidden love", says Wendy. "A story of enduring love beyond the grave, with echoes of Romeo and Juliet. It's been used elsewhere in ballet, music and literature and of course it relates to Paula's country of birth. We weren't sure but we hoped this would resonate with Paula."

The email was sent. But weeks passed, with no reply.

"We didn't hear anything."

Then in July Paula's assistant got in touch, wanting to know whether the Hambling measurements were in centimetres or inches; and whether they referred to a framed or unframed painting.

That was the first inkling Wendy and Sarah had that Paula was at work but even at this point Wendy hadn't heard which subject Paula had chosen.
Then in October 2013, they got a message from Paula’s PA to say that she had finished the picture. It was called Ines de Castro.

“It was the first we knew. A bolt out of the blue.”

The painting arrived at College in November 2013. Absolutely to size. And fully framed.

What was striking was the element of the story that Paula Rego had chosen to paint.

She depicts the moment when King Pedro kneels to pay tribute to his dead lover, Ines, exhumed from the tomb, her figure dominating the scene, appears as a skeleton, draped in royal robes and wearing a crown.

“The painting beautifully encapsulates the story,” says Wendy. “Here Pedro is, heartbroken, restoring Ines to her rightful place. Ines was a noblewoman but of lower status. She was killed because of fears she was influencing Pedro unduly and was having too much sway on affairs of state. It says a great deal about the position of women in society.”

It is an arresting image and the macabre element is typical of Paula Rego. What was also extraordinary was how the painting made a perfect partner to the Maggi Hambling picture, Gulf Women Prepare for War.

“Paula had spent maybe less than half an hour looking at the painting, yet she had matched the colour palette and tones perfectly”, says Wendy.

“The composition of figures in the Rego painting almost mirror the figures in the Hambling picture”, adds Sarah. “And she had used metallic paint so when the light hits it, it sparkles. It really is the most wonderful image.”

The painting was officially unveiled in May 2014 at the Benefactors Feast as part of Murray Edwards 60th anniversary celebrations.

“It’s one of the major pieces of the Collection,” says Wendy. “The juxtaposition with the picture by Maggi Hambling of those two striking images really challenges the notion of what women can do. To have two leading female artists providing the centrepiece is an endorsement of the quality of the Collection.”

One mystery remains, however.

“To this day we have never found out why she had picked this story over the others”, says Wendy, “though the Portuguese connection must have been appealing”.

What was never in doubt, however, was Paula’s support and commitment to the Women’s Art Collection and its aims.

In 2015 Wendy wrote to Paula asking whether she’d write an endorsement for a new catalogue for the Collection.

She did.

Paula, feted by so many, wrote of her own honour in being included in the Women’s Art Collection.

“Murray Edwards College has built up a fine and varied collection of painters, printmakers and sculptors – some well-known, some less well known.

I am proud that my work forms part of the collection.”
Jo Cobb is the visionary who broke the rules on what a Cambridge College garden should be to create the gorgeous Murray Edwards gardens of today. On arrival 23 years ago, she declared that, just as the college was the students’ home, so the grounds were their back garden. They should be able to lie on the grass and pick the flowers, as they did at home. Other colleges, at first disapproving, followed her lead. She also overturned architectural views of the ‘right’ sort of garden for a modernist building; she threw those out with the boring turf and empty borders. Now, our colourful gardens are as integral to the unique ethos of the college as our Grade II* Listed Buildings and Women’s Art Collection.

When Jo started her career as a plantswoman in 1977, after a degree in biology, the world of horticulture and gardens was dominated by men. A lover of gardening and the outdoors since she was a little girl, in her early years working in nurseries she was told constantly that she couldn’t do heavy work because she was a woman. But her huge knowledge of plants was respected and she rose to the prestigious role of running Durham Botanic Gardens before coming to the college. And that’s when she set about making history.

‘I was so rude at my interview. I said the gardens were terrible and looked like a council estate. The interview panel was shocked. They kept asking me questions about turf and grass. They wanted a modernist garden. But I said I has no interest in grass; I wanted to fill the garden full of flowers. It was arrogance. I didn’t care what other college gardens were like. I thought, ‘I am a woman. I think your traditions are stupid. I’m not going to do what you do.’ Luckily, the former president Rosemary Murray, had been a real plantswoman who had planted a section of the garden very well. I got the job.

I didn’t know what modernism was. I was supposed to create a modernist garden and I had to go to a library to find out what that was meant to be. There were two sorts; one immensely geometric like St Catherine’s in Oxford and the other wild like Gibberd Garden in Harlow, both lovely but not what I wanted. I wanted our gardens to be vibrant and colourful. I felt free to do what I wanted; I felt I didn’t need to conform. We led the way. Now other college gardens are filled with plants and interested in the student experience.

It took me ten years of slog to do it. There was still rubble everywhere from the building work and the lawns were all uneven. In those days the college was not fenced off and we used to get bad boys coming in. So I designed the garden so you could walk round it at night without passing any creepy bushes.

I had always remembered my childhood and the pleasure it gave me to pick flowers. We said that ours was not a display garden, it was a back garden. I wanted it to be a place where students could do what they did at home. Students asked me sometimes if they are allowed to lie on the grass and I said, ‘Yes, it’s your home.’

Dame Rosemary said, ‘You should be able to be alone in the garden.’ That’s the sense I have tried to create; that there are different places where you can feel you are alone. It’s a complex garden. There are tropical plants because I thought students were coming from all over the world and would want to see plants from home. We started growing vegetables like people do at home and now others have followed.

When I started, there were no other women head gardeners; all the other college head gardeners were men. I didn’t find them very friendly at first. But George Thorpe at Trinity mentored me and gave me plants. He helped me navigate college life. The other gardeners were mainly interested in machinery but I was interested in plants. It’s different now. We all meet up as head gardeners and get on.

Over time, I’ve become interested in where the plants come from and what they tell us about our history and empire. I was born in Uganda and I think that’s partly why I began to think about why particular plants were brought to England and what they mean to the people whose country we took them from.

I feel proper proud about what I’ve done. The college gave me the opportunity. If I’ve done anything, it’s to link the gardens with the architecture. That’s what I’ve achieved. And I’ve learned to love modernism.’

(As told to the President Dorothy Byrne. Our new Head Gardener Caitlin Sparksman shares Jo’s vision of our grounds as our students’ back garden and is developing an exciting programme of activities.)
CONFERENCING AND EVENTS
MURRAY EDWARDS EVENTS

WHO’S WHO AT MURRAY EDWARDS EVENTS?

We’ve had some exciting changes within the events team here at Murray Edwards, so we thought this edition would be the perfect opportunity to reintroduce some familiar faces and welcome in some new.

Anabelle Parslow
Anabelle joined the ME Events team as Business Development Manager in Sept 2022. She brings 12 years’ worth of event experience to the role and is very excited and passionate about the development and relaunch of our beautiful Paula Browne House. Watch this space!

Louise Segar
Louise has been with the ME Events team since August 2018. She is the fount of all knowledge when it comes to all the things events at Murray Edwards. Louise is our event guru – She looks after all our external events and commercial clients and will be your go-to expert for your event.

Martina Viglione
Martina joined the team in August 2022, having previously run events and weddings in her hometown of Naples, Italy. Martina looks after all our internal bookings, taking great care of our teams, fellows and students. Her attention to detail is incredible and often enviable!
WHY MURRAY EDWARDS?

If our wonderful team hasn’t been enough to convince you just yet, we have so much to offer in terms of space, culture, activities, bedrooms, our gorgeous gardens and much more.

• Two self-contained conference centres with raked lecture theatres to seat up to 140, flexible meeting rooms and attractive foyers for catering and registration

• A further selection of flat-floored meeting rooms in the Grade II listed building complete the portfolio of 18 meeting rooms

• The spectacular Dome dining hall offers a real wow factor for guests. Options of banquet and cabaret-style seating are available in one of the largest of the Cambridge college halls, with space for dancing and a bar too. Perfect for Christmas parties, award ceremonies and gala dinners

• Ensuite and shared bathroom accommodation available out of term time

• Tours of The Women’s Art Collection can be arranged as part of your event agenda. The collection is the largest women’s only art collection in Europe

• An impressive, inspiring environment, featuring striking Brutalist architecture, pretty, informal gardens and spectacular Fountain Court

• Unlike most colleges, we encourage you to walk on the grass and pick the fruits and flowers. You can also book a tour round the gardens, or a flower arranging workshop with our Head Gardener, Caitlin.

• Free on-site car parking

• A 20-minute walk from Cambridge city centre

CONTACT US

We would love to hear from you and discuss any future events you have in mind.

Please contact our events team on:
01223 762267
events@murrayedwards.cam.ac.uk

10% Discount for all Alumnae

As alumnae of Murray Edwards College, any event hosted by you at the college receives 10% off the total cost of booking*. Whether it’s a work conference or important board meeting, or perhaps something more fun, such as a milestone birthday, anniversary or wedding reception. We would love to be a part of whatever it may be and help you plan your meeting or celebration!

*exclusions apply

Alumnae events

Dates for your diary in 2023

Saturday 4th March 2023 – New Hall Society International Day/International Women’s Day celebration

Please join us at the College for a day of lively panel discussions featuring Murray Edwards students and Fellows and acclaimed external speakers focusing on issues that matter to women today – with plenty of time for socialising and dinner under the Dome. Plans are taking shape so please look out for news in our regular newsletters and online.

Saturday 8th July 2023 – Family Day

A welcome to alumnae and their families to enjoy the college gardens and enjoy afternoon tea. Enjoy activities like a hands on presentation from Cambridge Science Centre, fantastic face painting anything your imagination can conjure and more.

Saturday 23rd and Sunday 24th September 2023 – Alumnae weekend

Join us at College where there will be talks from the President and other speakers. On Saturday evening, we will hold our Alumnae Dinner, where we particularly welcome reunion years 1963, 1973, 1983, 1993, 2003 and 2013. There will be further activities on Sunday showcasing the Women’s Art Collection, College gardens and library.
The College would like to record its thanks to everyone who gave so generously to the Women Today, Women Tomorrow campaign, between July 2011 and April 2022. From significant increases in the range of student support, to the influential Collaborating with Men reports and improvements to Orchard Court, your support has made a huge difference to the lives and careers of Murray Edwards students and alumnae. A special thank you to our donors who wish to remain anonymous and those who have pledged to leave the College a gift in their Will.
Archibald Howie
HP Labs
Connie Hsu (1992)
Caren Huang (2003)
Ann Hudson (1967)
Mike Hudson
Elle Hungerford
Finty Hunter (2016)
Sally Hunter (1964)
Dawn Hunter-Ellis (1973)
Jeff Huntington
Elizabeth Hurst (1959)
Helen Hurst (1977)
Charlotte Huskisson (1975)
Megan Hutchesson (1995)
Sarah Hyde (1974)
Jessica Hysslop (2007)
Nancy Iacobucci (1962)
ICOM
Linda Iles (1973)
Laura Imperatori (2011)
Lincoln School
Jane Inglese (1970)
Paddie Ingleton (2009)
Institute of Chartered Accountants
in England & Wales
Institute of Physics
Interpublic Group
Sophie Ip (2011)
Laura Irvine (1992)
Kate Isaak (1988)
Khalida Ismail (1983)
Kathryn Ivany (1985)
Alien Jackson (1958)
Helen Jackson (1980)
Peter Jackson
Philip Jackson (1981)
Sue Jackson (1970)
Caroline Jackson-Flux (2009)
Sarah Jackson-Han (1988)
Mark Jacobs
Frances Jacomb-Hood (1979) & Anthony Hood
Bryony Jagger (1967)
Alia James (1995)
Diane James (1971)
Elizabeth James (2000)
Helen James (2001)
Jane James (1972)
Matilda James (2003)
Ola Janusz (2009)
Wendy Jeavons (1972)
Nikki Jeffcote (1978)
Lynn Jeffreys (1975) & Simon Jefferys
Marina Jerkyns (1962)
Anne Jessett (1976)
Cathy Jewkes (2006)
Elisabetta Jiang (2010)
Li Jiang (2007)
Renyu Jiang (2017)
Fiona Johansen (1982)
Charlotte Johanson (1975)
Chris & June Johnson
Gordon Johnson
Cynthia Johnston (1956)
Jean Jollands (1988)
Heather Jones (1982)
Katherine Jones (1985)
Lyne Jones (1973)
Lynwen Jones (1974)
Maria Jones (1988)
Nerys Jones (1973)
Nina Jones (2012)
Rachel Jones
Rebecca Jones (2004)
Sarah Jones (1978)
Nicole Jordan (1996)
Wendy Joseph (1971)
Sharon Jowitt (1994)
Eileen Joyce (1972)
Susan Joyner (1960)
Barbara Judge
Warsha Kalé (1990)
Nuala Kalfayan (1973)
Har Ye Kan (2003)
Karthika Kanaga Sundaram (2008)
Anna Kapsi (1987)
Kate Kardoomi (1989)
Victoria Karney (1973)
Premjit Kaur (1993)
Rachael Kaye (2008)
Sophie Keay (1999)
Toni Keevil (1996)
Jo Kelly (1989)
Sasha Kelly (2013)
Liz Kelner-Pozen (1968)
Miranda Kendall (1980)
Barbara Kennedy
Andrea Kereká (2009)
Celia Kerslake
Evá Ketté (2014)
Susanne Keusch (1988)
Eleonora Khabirova (2012)
Memaona Khan (2006)
Rehana Khanam (2005)
Dia Khanna (2002)
Basmah Khogeer (2011)
Abha Khushu (2008)
Shi Yun Khoo (2009)
Dia Khanna (2002)
Rehana Khanam (2005)
Dia Khanna (2002)
Basmah Khogeer (2011)
Abha Khushu (2008)
Shi Yun Khoo (2009)
Dia Khanna (2002)
Rehana Khanam (2005)
Dia Khanna (2002)
Basmah Khogeer (2011)
Abha Khushu (2008)
Shi Yun Khoo (2009)
ROLL OF BENEFACTORS
