



Roger Harrabin

Roger Harrabin (St Catharine's 1973) is the BBC's Environment Analyst. He has been broadcasting on environmental affairs for BBC News for more than 20 years, appearing on *The Ten O'Clock News*, *Today*, *Newsnight* and *Panorama*

When I went for the interview at St Catharine's, I got on well with John Andrew, the English Director of Studies, and Augustus Caesar, the Senior Tutor. (Yes, Augustus Caesar; and guess what his brother was called? Julius. His daughter was Julia Caesar, I believe.) I am notoriously absent-minded about my possessions. I left my glasses in John Andrew's room and had a subsequent personal chat when I went back for them.

The interview with 'Gus' Caesar was just before lunch; it was pouring with rain and I had taken to Cambridge a battered

old umbrella with spokes missing. My mother had brought me to the interview and after lunch she said 'Is that your umbrella?' It was a splendid umbrella with a cane handle: a tutorial umbrella! Meanwhile, Augustus Caesar had been parading round the streets of Cambridge with my battered old umbrella. I took his umbrella back to him, he ribbed me and we had another conversation. I was amazed to get a personal postcard from Gus next day saying 'Welcome to St Catharine's'.

I had liked Cambridge when I went there on a school trip. My English master thought it would suit me but feared it might be too difficult to get in to read English, so recommended Archaeology and Anthropology. Then, when I got my English A-level result, I switched my application back to English; I was offered a place without having to take the entrance exam.

My first day in Cambridge was, for a grammar school boy from Coventry, a completely 'other' experience. The man next door called himself Stanley J. Root: six foot six tall, thin as a beanpole, long straggly hair, Trotsky beard, floor-length white Afghan coat: an apparition. 'Hey man, I'm Stan.' He went on to advise the Russians on the flotation of the rouble.

I enjoyed reading English, particularly in my first summer term, which was spent reading Shakespeare and punting. What class of degree did I get? I've just told my wife I would ignore that question. I remember going to supervisions with a very camp poet in a little room with two cats which clawed at your sensitive parts. Supervisions are a wonderful privilege but I didn't go to lectures after my first term as I thought you would get more credit for thinking for yourself than for being told what to think. I worked for three hours in the mornings and that was it.

I was interested in seeing my girlfriend and playing football and table-tennis for the college. I should say that I played football very badly, but I was the top scorer in the St Catharine's third and then second team. I was fast, aggressive – and lucky.



Preparing to shoot at Gaumukh, the receding glacier at the head of the Ganges

I have fantastic memories of Cambridge. Cycling out to Girton for tea and crumpets; cycling off to Homerton for other activities

I was more interested in student politics on a college than a university level and was elected President of the JCR. Previously the Junior Common Room had appeared to be captured by factions interested in supporting Nicaragua or promoting fox-hunting. If you could have a non-partisan, technocratic JCR, you would do much more to support the lot of ordinary undergraduates. We were incredibly privileged but some unpleasantnesses could have been ironed out.

It was a fascinating time: St Catharine's needed to change, being stuck in its old ways. I had a lot of run-ins with the Bursar, one of the old sporting types, who didn't hold with en-suite bathrooms and thought undergraduates should piss in the sink as they had done in his days.

I started a college magazine which I edited for a time. The paper did some good because it supported a JCR campaign to get rid of the iniquitous KEF – Kitchen Establishment Fund; we all had to subsidise the kitchen to produce the most execrable food. We had a rent strike. It was a good moment of solidarity, with almost complete support. At the time the paper had a satirical article by 'Provocative Desmond'. No, it was anonymous, so I couldn't possibly say who he was. The satire was really as convincing

to the governing body as the rent strike; it forced them to laugh at the system. They brought in outside caterers; this put up the prices but people didn't mind as the food was now worth eating. I realized then what you could do with the printed word.

We did exert a very substantial pressure. We pressed for women to be allowed into the college, which was then single-sex, and for the relaxation of the gate hours. I was President of the JCR when Professor Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer became Master and later Vice-Chancellor. 'Swin' was a reformer and we had an ally in him; from the Master above and the JCR below, the governing body was caught in an unlikely pincer movement.

He used to hold a dinner for the JCR Committee once a year. He had a subtle and skilful butler called, I think, Henry, and would draw 'Sheerry?' and then, all in one ululating word, 'Sweetmediumordy?' Henry would top up your glass without you noticing until your knees were wobbly by the time it came to dinner. I never set out to get legless. I remember one member of the JCR Committee became so unwell that the only words he uttered were, 'Swin, where's the bog?' He hurled himself out of the door, never to return.

'Swin' was a good man, terribly, cripplingly shy and intimidatingly clever: a mathematician and a terrific polymath. When we came out of a Finals exam, we were complaining to him about a question on Ezra Pound's *Cantos* – and he started quoting from them in Italian. It's useful to have people like that around so that you know what smart is.

I have fantastic memories of Cambridge. Cycling out to Girton for tea and crumpets; cycling off to Homerton for other activities; cycling back one evening when a low mist hung over King's Parade and the Gothic crenellations of the Chapel; up early canoeing on the Cam when you could hear the birdsong not the traffic. I suppose I have always loved the natural world.

Was I interested in environmental issues? My friend James Stewart was a regular lunch buddy at St Catharine's. He went on to be an environment correspondent for the BBC in Wales and at the time had a partner named Anne. By a coincidence I went on to be the environment correspondent of the BBC in London and married a woman named Anne. He tells me that I was interested in the environment at Cambridge but I have no memory of it. But I have always had it drummed into me that waste is wrong. It distressed me, when someone offered me coffee, to see him filling up the kettle with enough water for eight. It was a waste of water and energy and I would have to wait longer for my coffee.

What I do remember, as one of the most painful memories of my life, is when I put on a hubristic performance of a play by John Gay, author of *The Beggar's Opera*, entitled *What D'Ye Call It?*, a tragical-comic-pastoral-farce. It was really dreadful; I didn't have the skills to direct it. Just before the first performance, news was brought to me that Cliff, who played the lead character, could not be found – and as we had no understudy, I would have to play the lead part. I sent an emissary to his room and Cliff was there, paralytically drunk. I did not know the words. I was shivering with apprehension. But mercifully we managed to revive him and he put in a barnstorming performance – as the drunken squire. ■



Clive Aslet

Clive Aslet (Peterhouse 1973) is the former editor and present editor-at-large of *Country Life*

I went to Peterhouse because it was ordained by a charismatic English teacher at King's College School, Wimbledon. Frank Miles treated us like adults, to the extent of lending one of his pupils his car. He said 'You must go to Peterhouse because you want to study History of Art.' The Faculty was very small at the time but there was a History of Art don at Peterhouse called David Watkin. I wasn't completely sure if I wanted to do the subject but I passed the entrance exam.

In those days History of Art was only a Part II course and you had to do something else for Part I. I did English for my first

two years. I was completely hopeless. Having had this incredibly inspiring English teacher at school, I found myself cast adrift in the English Faculty without a rudder. There was no captain. There was no coherence. One of my supervisors had written a very good book but was absolutely paralysed with shyness and supervisions were one long awkward pause, while I was having to busk somewhat, as I hadn't done much work.

I went off the rails, to a degree. It was the eternal problem of people who had been to a school which was very structured, with teachers to make

sure you did what you were supposed to do. Suddenly you found yourself away from home with all the freedom in the world. I won't say any more, to avoid embarrassing my children.

My first year was a disaster. There were only four or five people in my year at Peterhouse doing English and none of them was very committed. One of them became a successful thriller-writer. At the end of my time at Peterhouse, I used to wonder what he was doing after Hall in the library, which was a wonderful part of the college dating back to the 16th century. You could go there – unsupervised – after dinner and

he must have been casing the shelves for books which he stole and sold in London. With the bookplates still in them. He was sent to prison and wrote about it in his first novel. The library was locked in the evenings after that.

I got a Third at the end of my first year and very nearly failed. I was given a talking to. A drugs bust on some friends of mine rather ended the party, which was manifestly a good thing. I had to knuckle down. I requested L.C. Knights as a supervisor; he was part of the pantheon of Leavisite scholars (F.R. Leavis had been a controversial member of the Faculty). I was working hard and got a 2.1 in the second year.

Doing History of Art for the next two years was a dream. David Watkin taught the English neo-classical paper. He used to dress in beautifully tailored clothes and sometimes even starched collars, extremely

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Clive Aslet at Cambridge

traditional gear, while everybody else was maximum scruff. Robin Middleton was another wonderful man in the Faculty. He also taught the neo-classical paper, in his case the French side. He couldn't have been more of a contrast. He was a bird-like person; he had bought a repertoire of bright-coloured snakeskin jackets. Though Robin and David sniped at each other in a donnish way, they were very good friends.

I was quite college-based. Peterhouse was a wonderful college, particularly for me because everything operates better for me if it is small and cosy. The much maligned right-wingers of Peterhouse seemed, in that pre-

Michael Portillo was in the year above me; he was very good at putting together coalitions and doing deals for college elections

Thatcherite epoch of chaos and despair, a phalanx of hope. This – the mid-1970s – was the last gasp of the hippy era, as the '60s dribbled into the subsequent decade. It was a bleak time for the country as a whole, though I was shielded from this by the optimism of youth. Because of industrial action, the lights kept going out, though not for lucky Peterhouse, as it was on the same circuit as the former site of Addenbrooke's Hospital, where the electricity supply was kept going.

The cause of the time was NAG, the Nursery Action Group. Concern for graduate students' offspring wouldn't seem exceptional now but to Peterhouse it seemed very amusing that the agenda had somewhat shifted from world peace. Peterhouse was a right-wing college; people from other colleges would make the sign of the cross to ward off evil! There were a lot of dinners, with fine wines. Maurice Cowling, said to be a great influence on the Tory Party, was a history don. Michael Portillo was in the year above me; he was very good at putting together coalitions and doing deals for college elections. There were four sets of panelled rooms and if you had some sort of college office, such as the President of the Wine Society, you could argue you needed one for meetings ... I was President of the Wine Society.

The Junior Common Room was called the 'Sex Club', short for sexcentenary, because the college, founded in 1284, was more than 600 years old. Previously the Sex Club had been left-wing – everything was in those days – but there was a right-wing putsch when the left-wing, long-haired Irish candidate lost to the very clean-cut rowing candidate. It has to be said that both were extremely agreeable.

I got a 2.1. James Stourton, the Chairman of Sotheby's, who went to Cambridge shortly after me, recently told me that David Watkin told him I had got a First. If so, I'm sorry to disabuse him! In fact, I did get a Starred First for my dissertation, which was on a country house architect called William Eden Nesfield, the late 19th-century partner of Norman Shaw (designer of the Norman Shaw

building near the Houses of Parliament). In those days Victorian architects were very under-studied. The subject was suggested by David Watkin and it was a very good suggestion because there was a lot of material on Nesfield in different places and also because he was a character who intrigued me. This really directed the course of my subsequent career.

I had a moped originally, on which I had some narrow escapes at night. After that I went round on a Honda 360 motorbike and I remember going round Wales in the snow to country houses designed by Nesfield. I also remember creaking around the RIBA – Royal Institute of British Architects – in my leathers.

My first article for *Country Life* was about Nesfield. Although I took a lot of trouble with the style – if not the content – of my essays, I never did any student journalism. I had hoped to do research but I'm rather glad I didn't. I was offered a job on *Country Life* (I didn't apply to the magazine but was recruited, in the MI5 manner) and thought I'd better take it because I'd never get another crack at it. I started there six months after going down and I have been there ever since; I was editor for thirteen years.

Country Life was quite an academic place and ran long articles on country houses and the people who wrote them had all been to Cambridge; whenever one of their number moved on, they felt they had no choice but to look here. I had an attic room with a narrow staircase and a fat, jolly person came to sound me out. It was a bit like Winnie-the-Pooh visiting Rabbit; you weren't sure if he would get out. ■

The English Country House by Clive Aslet is published by Bloomsbury at £20.

Interviews by Jonathan Sale