Emmanuel College—My Good Fortune
by James Oscroft Wilkes (Matriculated 1951)

The Entrance Examination—Failure and Success

I was born in Southampton in 1932, and after spending much of WW II with my grandmother in Shropshire with neither electricity nor running water, I returned to my hometown to attend the little known but excellent Taunton’s Grammar School. Extra-curricular activities included chess, photography, swimming, water-polo, occasional long-distance cycling (a school pal and I cycled from Southampton to the Lake District in 1948, taking five days each way), and music—especially organ-playing.

My physics teacher, Mr. Munford, had attended Emmanuel College and recommended that I sit the entrance scholarship examination, which I did for the group of Emmanuel, Christ’s, Sidney Sussex, Queens’, and St. John’s Colleges, in December 1949. I recall staying in a gloomy and cold room in Warkworth Terrace and walking to the hall at St. John’s College for the written part of the examinations. Alas, I failed—and deservedly so, because in retrospect I had neither the ability nor the proper preparation. I still retain some of those examinations—they were difficult!

I stayed an extra year at Taunton’s and repeated the examinations. Things now looked brighter because I was called for an oral examination by a metallurgist in a hut in the shades of the Cavendish Laboratory. The examiner had a badly corroded brass fireplace fender and asked me how I would propose restoring it. I had not the slightest idea of what sophisticated chemical reaction he was seeking, so I blurted out “I recommend using some Brasso”. At least he must have been impressed by my quick response, because I was then called to talk with Dr. P.G. Ashmore on D staircase (later, “Sandy” was our nickname for him), and he asking—after he had noted my organ-playing—did we have an organ in our school chapel? Of course we didn’t have an organ at Taunton’s because we didn’t even have a chapel. Perhaps Sandy thought that I came from a public school that did have a chapel and an organ! Such were the days.

And this time the Christmas post brought the very pleasant news that I had not only gained admission to the first college of my choice, Emmanuel, but that I had also been awarded a Minor Open Scholarship, which meant that I would occasionally be reading the Latin grace at dinner, and I still recall every word: “Oculi omnium . . .”

Four Years at Emmanuel and the University (1951—1955)

As with all freshers, I was assigned to lodgings, in my case to 41 Maids Causeway, lived in by my most genial hosts Mr. and Mrs. Stock. Later, my wife Mary Ann and I established a firm friendship with them—Bill and May. Bill was a compositor at the Cambridge University Press and had a keen eye for beautiful page layouts, for which I always strive in my own electronic typesetting. Mrs. Stock provided breakfast, and a bath cost me a shilling. I had a sitting room partially heated by a gas fire, and a bedroom that was quite chilly in the winter. It took only a few minutes to walk to Emmanuel.

In my second and third years I was assigned to North Court—S3A and Z6B, the latter being audibly next to the Drummer Street bus station and the evening newspaper sellers.

I was conscious that many other students spoke differently from me, often ignoring their r’s (“ratha” instead of my “ratherr”), but I didn’t change, and even after 60 years I hope that I have some of what I consider a West-Country accent. Lord Reith did an enormous disservice to the country when he insisted on a standard “received pronunciation”, with little concern for preserving many local dialects.

Scholarly Activities—Natural Sciences and Chemical Engineering

Natural Sciences. For my first two years I read Natural Sciences—chemistry, physics, mathematics, and crystallography, and I still recall the names of several of my Emmanuel student colleagues. Lectures, to large audiences, were generally of average quality, and two or three of the chemistry and physics teachers did not have a firm grip on the fundamentals of thermodynamics.
Lecturers in chemistry whom I recall were Sharp, Kipping, Norrish, and Saunders. In mathematics, D.R. Hartree mumbled inaudibly into the blackboard. Few of my lecturers were outstanding or inspiring. I just skipped the mediocre lectures but was diligent in spending the time in reading the appropriate book instead. I recall Lawrence Bragg (Nobel laureate) in physics and Dr. Evans in crystallography as being particularly good lecturers.

Our own Emmanuel Ronald George Wreyford Norrish (1897—1978) was a genial and entertaining person who gave us physical chemistry lectures, in which we greeted him most times with a friendly hiss. One day he retaliated by opening the valve on a cylinder of nitrogen and hissing back at us. We roared our approval by stamping our feet, not only for that incident, but for other episodes of his lectures and stories that we appreciated. Little did we know that he was a German prisoner near the end of World War I.

My Emmanuel Tutor was Dr. Philip George Ashmore (1916—2002), known as “Sandy” (although not addressed by me as such!), a University Lecturer in physical chemistry with a specialty in photochemistry. He was most genial, although he pretended to be annoyed by me when I called to see him one day without my gown. Because of clothes rationing, the gowns were very short, known as “bum-freezers”, and they were mandatory wear to lectures, but not in laboratories. I think that Sandy was a little surprised when I did so well in the examinations.

Chemical Engineering. And then, one day in the Emmanuel College Library, it all changed. By chance, I came across a few years of the printed examinations from the new Chemical Engineering (ChE) Department. And by reading them, there was a good chance that if I switched to that department, I could put much of my chemistry, physics, and mathematics to use and dream of building an oil refinery. So I hastened to Tennis Court Road, where the ChE Department was housed in four temporary buildings or “huts”. I was greeted cheerily by the secretary, Margaret Sansom, who was later to become a life-long friend of me and my wife-to-be, Mary Ann. And then I met the brilliant head of the department, Terence
Robert Corelli Fox, Shell Professor of Chemical Engineering. He welcomed me enthusiastically, told me all about the department, and gave me a tour. There was no doubt that this was the place for my further studies, so I switched to chemical engineering in the Michaelmas Term 1953. It was a two-year Part II, which meant a total of four years as an undergraduate.

What a welcome change! Chemical engineering was a small, intimate, friendly, and encouraging department, with seven faculty (Terence Fox, Stan Sellers, Denys Armstrong, John Davidson, Peter Danckwerts, Peter Gray, and Kenneth Denbigh). With one exception they were all excellent lecturers, well prepared, and as there were just 30 of us there (the biggest class that they had had to date), it was a tightly knit, enthusiastic, and genial group. I later learned that in 1946 Professor Norrish was one of the prime movers in the foundation of the department, and I am eternally grateful to him for that foresight. My Emmanuel fellow chemical engineer and close friend Thomas Grindley (Half-Blue in discus, ob. 2018) and I were designated to run the University of Cambridge Chemical Engineering Society—Tom was Secretary and I was President. We organised plant trips for our class— including Thomas Hedley (Procter & Gamble) in Tilbury, a sugar-beet factory in East Anglia, and ICI in Billingham—and also guest evening speakers.

Extracurricular Activities

I found that I could complete most of my academic work during the daytime. I also read my textbooks during vacations, and was rewarded by doing very well in my examinations at the end of each of my four years at Emmanuel. I therefore had plenty of time in the evenings to do other things.

Organ performance. Foremost, at least to start, was a continuation of my organ studies, and usually I spent an hour after dinner practicing on the then 1908 Hill, Norman & Beard Organ in the Chapel. In 1951 the Organ Scholar was Kenneth Beard, who became organist and choirmaster first at St. Michael’s College in Tenbury and then at Southwell Minster. “Ken” gave me weekly lessons in the Michaelmas Term 1951, during which I learned the repertoire (including the Bach Trio Sonata No. 1 and the Mendelssohn Sonata No. 4) and other keyboard skills for the diploma of Associate of the Trinity College of Music (London). I was fortunate enough to pass the examination in Southampton just before Christmas. Emmanuel held regular organ recitals, and Kenneth Beard returned in 1952-1953 to perform the very difficult Reubke Sonata in one of them—he was very good. He was succeeded as organ scholar by Michael Allard.

After one of those recitals, a kind lady, Mrs. Henn, unexpectedly came up to me and invited me to her house, where I had the pleasure of meeting Sir Shane Leslie, a first cousin of Winston Churchill. I think that the gracious lady’s husband was probably Thomas Rice Henn, President of St. Catharine’s College from 1951—1961.

The current organ was built in 1988 by Kenneth Jones and Associate of Bray in Ireland. It uses the same case as the Bernard Smith organ that was installed soon after the chapel was built in 1677. It has 33 speaking stops distributed over three manuals and a pedalboard, and employs mechanical action, which is so sensitive that if you brush accidentally against another key, then the pipes will sound immediately. Therefore, the present organ is an ideal test for would-be organ scholars, to explore their keyboard precision and dexterity!

Science Societies. The only discrimination that I encountered was that Emmanuel had two science societies—the Thomas Young Club, with membership restricted to Scholars and Exhibitioners, and the Science Society for everybody else. I became Vice-President of the Thomas Young Club. We met monthly in the Chaderton Room, and the only two meetings I can recall were a talk on walruses and a demonstration of a clavichord by Thurston Dart, who brought his delicate instrument with him in a taxi. Both societies have since disappeared but I have recently been contacted by an Emmanuel undergraduate who wishes to reinstate The Thomas Young Society (egalitarian this time, of course). The Thomas Young Club also participated in Rag Day—an annual event in which we did silly things in order to entice the public to give money for charity. One year, we constructed “An Aircraft named Desire” out of a trolley with a barrel for a fuselage and towed it around the Cambridge streets; I wore my dressing gown and a beret. The Club also set up occasional hilarious Commissions, one of which was to establish the
swan as the international standard of length, being the distance between successive swans on our Thomas Young Club tie. We failed in that mission.

**Emmanuel Orchestra.** Three of my Thomas Young colleagues played in the Emmanuel Orchestra—violin, trumpet, and oboe—and they easily persuaded me to join because the orchestra needed a tympanist. Of course, I knew nothing about it, but soon learned the rudiments. Later, as another tympanist became available and the double-bass chair was vacant, I moved there. The instrument should be tuned in fourths—E, A, D, and G, but the thought of learning four strings was too much for me, so I tuned mine to D-G-D-G. That way, I only had to learn two basic notes, not four. My mediocre double-bass playing (completely self-taught in a manner of speaking) was effectively disguised because I never had to perform a solo line, and by the sound of the rest of the orchestra, which was competent but not great. But we had fun, and the orchestra played a very important role in College life.

It's amazing how well our concerts were attended—the Old Library wasn't completely full, but we certainly needed two successive nights to accommodate everybody, both Michaelmas and Lent Terms. For the Easter Term, we did the first half in the Chapel, during which I once played the “big” Bach Prelude & Fugue in B minor on the organ; for the second half we moved to the Old Library. There, the orchestra always performed first, starting with the National Anthem, which enthused the audience so much that they immediately demanded an encore. The orchestra was only part of the entertainment, and we played the likes of Grieg’s “The Hall of the Mountain King”. Depending on the talent available there would be also be a string or brass ensemble and probably a solo piano or bassoon or whatever, and the evening would be capped by a rousing Gilbert and Sullivan Excerpt [sic], always bringing the house down. The most notable performer was the Dixie Professor of Ecclesiastical History—Rev. Norman Sykes (1897-1961), who wore a bonnet and hilariously played the part of “Buttercup” in “HMS Pinafore”. George Porter also joined in and later shared the Nobel Prize with his mentor Ronald Norrish in 1967. Sykes became Dean of Winchester (1958—1961), sadly dying in office early in his tenure.

![Rev. Norman Sykes](image)

*Copyright, NPG x 104708*

Additionally, there were regular performances in the Old Library of Handel’s “Messiah”, under the direction of that energetic Fellow Classicist, Leonard Hugh Graham Greenwood (1880—1965), who had rooms in Emmanuel House. Near the end of the Michaelmas Term we performed Part I and the Hallelujah and the Final Choruses; and near the end of the Lent Term it was Parts II and III. The four soloists were selected beforehand, and the conductor (with very definite and strict beats of his baton) was Mr. Greenwood. But the rest was ad hoc—the Emmanuel Orchestra formed the nucleus of the musicians, but anybody else (and they came from throughout Cambridge) could join in; and the substantial audience formed the Chorus. Greenwood’s Messiahs were enjoyed and fondly remembered.

And that wasn’t the end of music at Emmanuel. Most Sunday evenings, the genial and hospitable Dean Hugh Burnaby held an open house in his rooms in the Hostel to listen to an hour of classical music on his gramophone. About a dozen of us would attend. One evening, his gramophone
somehow picked up radio signals from CamTax, the local taxi service, and we could hear reservations being made—fortunately, this sometimes hilarious interference seldom happened.

Because I was Secretary of the Musical Society, I lived in College during my fourth and final year—in E2, two flights of stairs and a walk across Front Court to the nearest toilets. I had two rooms, adjacent to Michael Allard, Organ Scholar. My sitting room was sparingly heated by a gas fire, and there was no heat in the chilly bedroom, where I kept the two bass fiddles that belonged to the Emmanuel Orchestra.

*Table Tennis.* For most of my four years at Emmanuel there was an active Table Tennis Club, and I was certainly one of its ringleaders, becoming Captain of the Club in my third year. We played in the fairly spacious lecture room above the Old Library, which necessitated the clearing of chairs and erecting our table almost every night, but that was quickly done. Our team played home and away against several of the other colleges. I was good, but not quite up to Varsity standard.

As a subset of the Table Tennis Club, some of us formed The Bats, a group that invited ladies from Newnham and Girton to come and play mixed doubles at Emmanuel. We even commissioned our own tie, a black bat on a crimson background.

**Edward Welbourne**

An astonishing person, Mr. Edward Welbourne (1894-1966), was Master of Emmanuel during almost all of my student days. C. Northcote Parkinson in his book *A Law Unto Themselves* (Houghton Mifflin 1966) said of him: “Edward Welbourne was among the ablest men that Cambridge has produced in the twentieth century. . . . The Armistice of 1918 brought him back to Emmanuel with an open leg wound, a well-earned Military Cross, his health impaired and his illusions gone. . . . As a student in History, he received three distinguished University prizes, and published two good books, the last in 1920.”
Welbourne’s great and lasting influence on Emmanuel students lay in just conversing with them. He collared me on several occasions—why, I don’t know, because I wasn’t a historian—and I recall the exact spot, in the Front Court just outside the passage to the Fellows’ Parlour, and I was “in” for at least an hour every time. His strength lay in proposing some idea—such as politics in America, coal mines in the Rhondda valley, the dearth of Roman Catholics in East Anglia, or The Establishment. He gradually led me into taking a viewpoint on one of his ideas and he would then take a completely opposite position, and there we were, with most interesting and educational discussions. Welbourne was a great teacher.

Miscellaneous

Student mailboxes were fixed to the wall near the Porters’ Lodge. In the “Comments” notebook in the JCR (now the Museum of College Life) some students complained that the College meals were poor, but considering that we still had some rationing left over from World War II, I was quite happy with the quality. High-jinks included climbing over the south wall after hours and swimming in the Fellows’ swimming pool late at night.

Some of the more wealthy students occasionally had parties in their room at which strong alcohol was freely dispensed, sometimes resulting in students becoming quite ill and occasionally doing significant damage to College woodwork. In retrospect I think that the College Governing Body should have acted more strongly in warning students about the dangers of excessive drinking.

Communication with my parents was invariably by frequent letters, although once or twice a term I had the luxury of using the pay telephone in the “kiosk” in the hallway opposite Room A-1, occupied then I think by Peter Hunter Blair, Senior Tutor, whom I once heard talking about the Anglo-Saxons on the BBC Third Programme. My mother made an ingenious mailbag, with a reversible address, whereby I could send her my laundry and receive clean clothes in return.

In the city of Cambridge I recall occasional concerts in the Guildhall, one memorable one with the operatic singer Anna Russell “doing” the whole Wagner Ring Cycle in 25 minutes—hilarious. There was also a roller-skating rink on the wooden floor of the Corn Exchange. And, of course, we went punting on the Cam, usually going as far as Grantchester. The river was the perfect depth (about four feet) for punting.
Farewell and Reunion

And in June 1955 it was time to take those six three-hour examination papers for the Chemical Engineering Tripos. I relaxed by going to the cinema the night before every one of those exams—a little repetitious because there weren’t six cinemas in Cambridge!

Michigan—Cambridge—Michigan. I didn’t know what to do next but was fortunate in being awarded a King George VI Memorial Fellowship, amply endowed by the English-Speaking Union, to study for a ChE master’s degree at the University of Michigan. And, of course, that meant another delightful hour-long discourse with Mr. Welbourne, who had to sign my application form (he really got going on America).

I met Mary Ann soon after I arrived in Ann Arbor (a delightful city), and we were married on 18th August 1956 and spent a wonderful four weeks in driving around the American West, a splendid revelation for me. We even walked down to the bottom of the Grand Canyon and out in one day—nine miles each way and descending and (ouch!) ascending more than a vertical mile.

We returned to Cambridge, and in 1956 I was appointed as a Demonstrator in the Chemical Engineering Department, starting in January 1956. Mary Ann taught at Brunswick and Arbury Schools and we lived at Madingley Hall. I found myself supervising doctoral students with no PhD myself, and I wanted the experience. But the rules of Cambridge didn’t allow me to be simultaneously a faculty member and a doctoral student. So I tried to do an external London PhD and that was OK provided I had a bachelor’s degree from London and not Cambridge.

So, I left in 1960 for the ChE Department at Michigan, where I could fulfill my ambition of pursuing a PhD while simultaneously being a faculty member, retiring in 2000 after 40 very satisfying years of teaching, research, and book-writing. I was chairman of the department from 1971—1977, and was fortunate enough to be awarded a named chair, an Arthur F. Thurnau Professorship, for my perceived abilities in classroom teaching.
The Great Reunion with Emmanuel. Mary Ann and I returned to England many times after 1960, with occasional visits to Cambridge, mainly to see our friend Margaret Sansom, with little contact with either the ChE Department or Emmanuel.

And in 1988 I thought I would pay perhaps a last respect to Emmanuel and I was wandering in the Front Court when a gentleman approached and politely asked if he could help, to which I replied: “Oh, I know my way around the College pretty well, thanks, but may I ask who you are?” “I’m Derek (Stanley) Brewer, the Master” [1977-1990] was the astonishing reply, and he kindly invited me to dinner that night—being the summer, it was in the Fellows’ Parlour, and I recall that some of the other diners were A.A. (Albert Alan) Townsend, Peter Rickard, and Edward Sands. After dinner, Derek (as I knew him later) and I walked across the Front Court (still the only time I’ve ever done that) and visited Susan Rankin, then recently appointed to the Faculty of Music. I recall that the new Kenneth Jones organ for the Chapel was going to be delivered the next day.

Thanks to Derek Brewer’s initiative, my interest in Emmanuel was rekindled and Mary Ann and I explored the possibility of a bequest to the College. Alas, the situation was bungled by somebody whose name is best forgotten, and my enthusiasm diminished. But a few years later Neil Plevy was appointed Development Director, and took the initiative to look into my file and sent me a letter of apology, regretting the previous indifference. Things improved radically after that, and Neil’s good work was continued by Sarah Bendall—an excellent Development Director and now a close friend.

Later, I realised that Derek Brewer (1923-2008) was a renowned medieval scholar. And when I discovered that he attended the annual and enormous International Congresses on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University, which is only 110 miles from Ann Arbor, Mary Ann and I invited him to stay with us, which he did. I cannot overstate the respect that I have for Derek—scholarly, modest, friendly, warm-hearted, and undoubtedly one of the great Masters of Emmanuel. His tenure saw the admission of women, the Park Terrace acquisition, and the Emmanuel quadricentenary.

Derek returned, with his wife Elisabeth, to stay with us the following year, and in 2007 we had the additional pleasure of hosting Richard Wilson (Master) and Sarah Bendall.

Encouraged by the warm reception at Emmanuel, I stayed at the College for a few days almost every year, and continue do to so. Mary Ann and I were very happy to secure the Louise Riley-Smith portrait of Head Porter David Glover for the College, and it now hangs in the new extension of South Court. Head Gardener Christoph Keate has been particularly friendly. In 2007 I had the unexpected honour of being elected as a Bye-Fellow and one of my great annual pleasures is to talk with Fellows and guests in the Parlour after dinner. Sarah Bendall, Richard Wilson, and Fiona Reynolds, our current Master, have been particularly gracious towards me and I count them as close friends. But I have also enjoyed long conversations with David Livesey, Alan Baker, Jeremy Caddick, Robert Henderson, Stephen Watson, Christopher Whitton, Barry Windeatt, and others. Derek Brewer told me that the
Emmanuel Fellows’ Parlour was the best room in Cambridge, and I completely agree—Emmanuel was indeed my Good Fortune.