Wednesday Lectures – Autumn term 2026

The lectures this term are being run as either Zoom or hybrid events, giving members the opportunity to apply for a limited number of pre-booked places to attend in person. The talks will be held in the Pink Room here at Bridge Street. Places can be booked 7 days before each lecture. Please contact the Office to book giving your name and membership number. Zoom links are on the website and will be included in the Bulletin each Wednesday on the day of the lecture. Lectures will start at 2.15pm. No entry to the Pink Room before 2.00pm.

Any last-minute changes to the programme will be publicised in the weekly Bulletin.

7 October — The Remarkable Lady Bible Hunters — Hybrid

Speaker Professor Janet Soskice

Agnes and Margaret Smith are amongst the least known and most unusual of 19th century Cambridge residents. In 1892, middle-aged and without any formal academic qualifications, the Scottish twins made their way by camel and foot across the Sinai desert to St. Catherine's Monastery where Agnes made one of the most important Bible finds of the century. This launched the twins on a career of eastern Bible hunting, sleeping in tents, placating sceptical monks and coping with unscrupulous dragomans, in the midst of which they founded Westminster College, Cambridge. Their struggles for recognition from Biblical scholar back home in Cambridge would prove as taxing as their desert travels. Their finds have made them central to Christian, Jewish and Muslim text scholarship.

14 October — Rhyme and Reason - Political satire or nursery fodder? — Hybrid

Speaker Susan Ackroyd

What can 26 'nursery' rhymes tell us about the changes in England from the 1200s to the 1700s? From the 'sheep' rhymes to the baby rocking on a treetop, the rhymes tell us much about religion, politics, taxation, and more. Who was Mother Hubbard? Why were the mice being persecuted? What plum did Jack Horner covet?

21 October — Modern shipping and the economic and social impact of containers — Hybrid

Speaker Miles Dodd

The talk will briefly describe the traditional methods of carrying cargos across the seas; the labour, time, loading methods, and port implications. It will then go on to touch upon a number of solutions which attempted to improve the system, and the main reasons for the emergence of containers as the optimal method for all but short voyages. It will then discuss the implications of the new system for loads unsuitable for containers; for port design and operations; for port workers; and most significantly, for trade and the movement of cargo.

28 October — Eddington, Past, Present and future — Hybrid

Speaker Matt Johnson

Eddington is one of Cambridge's new neighbourhoods and offers a fascinating case study in how Cambridge seeks to reconcile growth, sustainability, affordability and quality of life, but its story began decades before the first residents arrived. The University of Cambridge's search for space, affordable staff housing and room for research evolved from discussions in the 1980s into the ambitious North-West Cambridge Development. We examine the ideas behind its homes, school, community buildings, public art, green spaces and pioneering environmental infrastructure and look ahead to proposed future phases, including thousands of additional homes, expanded amenities and open spaces, and improved walking, cycling and public-transport connections.

4 November — Intersecting lives: Captain James Cook (1728-1779) and HMS Endeavour (1764-1778) — Zoom

Speaker Peter Atkinson

A lecture on the round-the-world voyage of discovery (1768-1771) made by James Cook on HMS Endeavour and the careers of Cook and Endeavour before and after their voyage together. Endeavour began life as a collier; later she was a supply ship for the Falklands Islands, a troop carrier and a prison ship. Before being assigned to Endeavour, Cook had a significant role in the Seven Years' War. Afterwards, he made two more voyages of discovery across the Pacific, dying on the second during a conflict with Indigenous people on Hawaii.

11 November — The vulnerable West Antarctic ice sheet and global sea-level rise — Hybrid

Speaker Michael Haigh

The ice sheet in West Antarctica is melting faster than anywhere else in the continent. The resulting meltwater is entering the ocean and is driving global sea-level rise. Melting of the ice is accelerating at an alarming rate, and could raise sea levels by several metres over the coming centuries. For these reasons, accurate predictions of the future of West Antarctica are critical in order for the UK to develop effective climate-change response strategies.

18 November — Gwen John: Intimism, the Inner Life, and Public Presence

Speaker Philip Stott — **Hybrid**

2026 witnessed the National Museum Cardiff's major retrospective of the 'strange beauties' of Welsh-born artist, Gwen John (1876-1939). This talk examines the life and work of the artist, now regarded as one of the most significant of the C20th. Focusing on London and France, we explore John's relationships with friends and leading cultural figures, including younger brother, Augustus, Modersohn-Becker, Picasso, Rilke, and Whistler; her impassioned affair with Auguste Rodin; and her conversion to Catholicism. While playing a key role in promoting the visibility of women artists, John always sought an intimate inner life devoting herself entirely to her unique art.

25 November — Botanical expeditions in the 21st Century — Hybrid

Speaker Matthew Jeffrey

Cambridge University has a long history of plant collecting in the wild, with one particularly famous alumnus attending a certain 'Voyage of the Beagle'.
But how do you organise a plant hunting expedition in the modern era? Matthew will tell some stories from the field and describe how the Cambridge University Botanic Garden conducts fieldwork across temperate regions of the world.

2 December — Your life is manufactured - Revealing the secrets of how things get made and delivered to you — Hybrid

Speaker Tim Minshall, Dr John C Taylor Professor of Innovation, Head of the Institute for Manufacturing, and Fellow of Churchill College, University of Cambridge

We all live in a manufactured world. Everything around us other than people, plants, rocks and animals has been made by someone and delivered to where it is needed. And yet the processes by which these things appear in our lives are largely invisible. This talk will make that largely invisible world, visible, and discuss why – if we want to have a more sustainable and equitable world - we need to re-think what we make, and how and where we make it.

9 December — Science of laughter — Hybrid

Speaker Prof Sophie Scott CBE

Professor Sophie Scott is perhaps best known for her groundbreaking work on the science of laughter, demonstrating how it supports social bonding and engages both emotional and motor brain systems.