

The Cambridge Festival of Ideas

In the days when loyal historians competed to lay the foundation of their alma mater as far back in the past as possible, Dr Frostly reported the following anecdote.

According to Dr Frostly, Prince Cadwald was fowling in the fens when he came across a small but attractive idea whom he immediately enrolled in his household. Unfortunately the idea was worked to death and a repentant Cadwald founded what we would now call a retirement home for elderly ideas on the river Cam. Over in the course of time Cadwall's foundation transformed itself into the University we know.

Be that as it may, there is fairly strong evidence of ideas being associated with the University as early as the 15th century and strong documentary evidence that a 'festival of ideas' was well established by Elizabethan times.

Once a year, the ideas would be let out of their cells within the University to parade in procession to the 'Hill of Beans' as Peas Hill was then quaintly named there to be greeted by Town and Gown (represented by the Mayor and the Vice Chancellor). They would then pass the rest of the day enjoying the open air.

As the onlooker will see, the main lines of the festivities have remained unchanged through the centuries. It is said that Beethoven based the Prisoner's Chorus in *Fidelio* on a description of the Cambridge Festival of Ideas given to him by his friend Bridgetower.

The opening procession is headed by the foolish ideas. This is, perhaps, the most popular part of the day as the spectators enjoy the capering of these gaily attired individuals throwing 'swete metes' (now toffees) to the crowd.

Next come the old ideas led by a small child carrying a large bouquet. Later she will present the flowers to one of the oldest ideas. (To prevent jealousy the particular idea is chosen by lot.) If you are lucky, you may glimpse the handsome and benevolent features of Darwin's dangerous idea. It is, indeed, a testament to the power of rote teaching and learning that this once turbulent youth is now a respected and well loved member of the community.

The old ideas are followed by the longest part of the procession, the bad ideas. In the old days, the bad ideas behaved in very rowdy manner shouting insults and making rude gestures at the crowd. In Victorian times they would be escorted by athletic 'boating men' from the various Colleges. However, those days are long past and the bad ideas now march past proudly in fine uniforms to the sound of the Administration Marching Band. By long tradition, this part of the procession is led by the bad ideas of the government

and benefactors but there are plenty of 'home grown' bad ideas to form the main body.

Mention of the 'old days' reminds me to say that the dictates of 'health and safety' are uppermost in the organisers' minds. All ideas are medically examined to make sure they are not contagious. It is true that, over the centuries, a few people have been struck by an idea, but experience shows that the effect is seldom long lasting.

The tail end of the procession is brought up by the good ideas. Though few in number and overshadowed by the glamour of the rest of the show, there can be no mistaking the camaraderie of this little band. No doubt, they remember this year's address by the Vice Chancellor when he emphasised that every minority however small is entitled to respect.

The rest of the day is spent in celebration on Parker's Piece where, according to the 17th century statutes, each idea 'shall enjoy a gallon of sack and half a goose' (now represented by half a pint of orange squash and a hamburger). The Old Schools' travelling half-bakery is a particular favourite with the young and the young in heart.

Unfortunately, the procession is sometimes interrupted by well meaning, but misguided, members of the Ideas Liberation Front. These young people do not realise the harsh life that ideas face outside the kindly care of the university. Most ideas simply do not survive their first brush with reality. The tragic condition of the remainder who then find themselves rejected because they are too new, too old, politically unacceptable or just too difficult must bring a pang to the hardest of hearts. There can be no doubt that, if asked to choose, ideas would prefer to remain far removed from the outside world.

Some people claim that ideas are subject to rigorous examination within the University. This is true only of a few old fashioned departments, the examinations are strictly supervised and the ideas themselves are said to enjoy the exercise.