

# *History of Universities Seminar*

## *Summer 2021*

### *Convenors*

Miles Taylor (University of York, UK)  
Ku-ming (Kevin) Chang (Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan)  
Heike Jöns (Loughborough University, UK)  
Tamson Pietsch (University of Technology Sydney, Australia)

### *Contact email*

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### *Timing*

Wednesdays, 2.00-3.30 pm (BST/UTC+1), online via Microsoft Teams

### *Webpage for registration*

<https://www.histgeog-uni.net/history-of-universities-seminar/>

**2 June 2021**

**The university: a material history**  
William Whyte (St John's College Oxford)

### **Abstract**

The whole of university life is framed and shaped by things: some of them obvious and intended to impress; others, more intangible. Our universities are made up of people and ideas, but also of things and places. The smells of university are never quite forgotten, be it the odour of old bindings in a library, or the stench of sweat and cheap drink on the dance floor. The sounds of university are similarly evocative, and equally help define a place. It's a sense – a sensibility – brilliantly captured in Philip Larkin's episodic evocation of his old undergraduate college, which also happens to be the place where I work. In 'Dockery and Son', it is not the thoughts or the people that embody the university. It is the stuff: 'The lawn spreads dazzlingly wide/A known bell chimes.' Larkin reminds us what so many historians have often forgotten: that to understand the university we need to recapture the importance of the material world. In this paper, I will try to tease out what happens to the writing of university history when we take this stuff seriously.

**William Whyte** is professor of social and architectural history at St John's College, Oxford. His books include *Redbrick: a social and architectural history of Britain's civic universities* (2015) and, as general editor with Dan Hicks, *The Bloomsbury Cultural History of Objects* (2020). Current projects include *The University: a material history*, for Harvard University Press, and, with Ning de Coninck-Smith and Julia Horne, *The Bloomsbury Cultural History of Higher Learning*. He is also working with Mishka Sinha on a project exploring the relationship between St John's and the empire.