How to find out about Cambridge alumni

Sources of information on men and women who have been students at Cambridge vary considerably in detail and location down the centuries. Because Cambridge is a collegiate University, data may be found in the archives of the Colleges as well as in the University Archives. Each College administers its own records. College contact details are online at map.cam.ac.uk/colleges. If you do not know the College of membership of an individual, the central University records can act as an initial pointer.

By the fifteenth century, Colleges were beginning to admit and house male students though the University retained responsibility for the award of degrees. Colleges therefore may retain information on a student’s origins and career after Cambridge while the University retains details of initial enrolment (‘matriculation’ as it is known) and degrees earned. From the later nineteenth century onwards, College records may also include details of accommodation, teaching and membership of clubs and societies. University records will be confined to formal dates of the start and finish of studies, examinations sat and degrees awarded.

These notes provide brief guidance on how to start researching an individual’s Cambridge connections.

1. Biographical information on students up to 1900 was compiled from original sources in the University and Colleges by John and J.A. Venn and published as Alumni Cantabrigienses from the earliest times to 1900 (CUP: Cambridge, 1922-54) 10 volumes.

2. Women were not admitted to formal membership of the University until 1948 and do not appear in Alumni Cantabrigienses. For details of women students before then researchers should contact the archivists of the two Cambridge colleges open to women, Girton College (www-lib.girton.cam.ac.uk) and Newnham College (newn.cam.ac.uk/about-newnham/archives).

3. Both Alumni Cantabrigienses and the admissions registers for Girton and Newnham Colleges up to 1900 are now online as A Cambridge Alumni Database (ACAD) at venn.lib.cam.ac.uk/Documents/acad/intro.

4. For the period 1901-12, a list of student names with College of membership and dates of matriculation and graduation only was published as The book of matriculations and degrees 1901-1912 (CUP: Cambridge, 1915).

5. For the period 1912-42, the same details were recorded, but not published, in ‘The book of matriculations and degrees, 1912-42’ (held in the University Archives, classmark: UA Degr.41-3; online description here).

6. For the period ca 1880-ca 1965, student name and College, subjects of study and examination, examination results and dates of matriculation and graduation were inscribed in series of record cards, but not published (held in the University Archives, classmark: UA Graduati 12-34; online description here).
7. For the period after ca 1965, when the student record cards were computerised, student data is held centrally by the University’s Student Registry. Please note that the Registry does not verify degrees to third parties – requests for verification must be made directly with the individual who can then decide whether to release their personal data. Further information is available on the Student Registry’s website.

If your enquiry relates to the period after 1901 and before ca 1965 and you do not know the College of membership of an individual, it is best to write to the University Archives for help (email: archives@lib.cam.ac.uk).

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