

Cambridge Scientists and Explorers, 16th Century to the Present Day

This course explores the histories and scientific discoveries of eminent Cambridge alumni who played a significant role in transforming our understanding of the natural world and the universe. We will focus on the discoveries and contributions of selected mathematicians, physicists, biologists, chemists and explorers including Sir Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, James Watson, Francis Crick and Rosamund Franklin - the discoverers of DNA's structure, Alan Turing and Stephen Hawking. Covering even a fraction of the enormous part Cambridge has played in the history of modern science would be impossible in a short course, so focusing on a few key figures will provide a context for the understanding of scientific discovery at Cambridge from the seventeenth century to the present day. This course does not require any prior knowledge of science or technical understanding of the fields explored – it is a historical and cultural introduction to the lives and the work of these famous figures, their most significant contributions, and their careers at Cambridge and beyond.

Class themes:

1. The history of science in Cambridge
2. Cambridge and the Scientific Revolution before Newton
3. The Newtonian Revolution and its legacies
4. New Biologies: Darwin and DNA
5. A cultural history of quantum physics: Turing, Hawking, and knowing the scientific unknowable

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