

Editorial

Even though I've been a member of the *Mathematics Today* Editorial Board for some years, I still have vivid memories of the first board meeting I attended. Coincidentally, this was also my first visit to De Morgan House in Russell Square. Being somewhat nervous, I arrived in London well before the meeting was due to start. So, with some time to kill I found myself in the British Museum, which is just around the corner from our meeting venue.

Nowadays, there's lots of comment about what your favourite colour, place, song, dog breed or whatever says about you. I'm sure there's something similar, although possibly more erudite, about what your favourite exhibit in the British Museum says about you. In the hope that I'm not sharing more than I should, or revealing some deep inner character flaw, I'll tell you my favourite.

Despite spending most of my career working with computers and embedded electronics I have a penchant for mechanical things. Especially ones where you can see some of their inner workings and even a novice like me can appreciate some of the magic that makes them tick. So, it's probably no surprise that I became absorbed by a rolling-ball clock.



Rolling-ball clock

If you're not familiar with the concept, rather than using a pendulum, the clock is regulated by a ball that rolls along a path inscribed on a tilted plane. When the end of the path is reached, the angle of tilt changes and the ball reverses its path. Despite its simplicity, I watched this simple process for five minutes or more.

For various reasons, rolling-ball clocks never really caught on. The plane the ball travels on means they're quite large, more suitable for a coffee table than a mantelpiece. More importantly, they're not especially good timekeepers. They are, however, wonderfully calming to watch.

That feeling of calm began to dissipate as, approaching my first board meeting, I climbed the stairs in De Morgan House, looking for our Institute's room. A series of portraits on the

wall seemed to convey messages to me: that important things happened here; that I was privileged to be a part of them; and, most of all, that I bore a responsibility to ensure things continued on to future generations. Fortunately, the other board members were very welcoming so it didn't take long before my equilibrium was restored. That said, I do believe the messages of importance, privilege and responsibility are relevant for the work of the IMA and, more specifically, *Mathematics Today*.

Similar to my first board meeting, it was with some trepidation that I picked up the pen to write my first editorial. During my time supporting *Mathematics Today* I have had the great pleasure of working with several different editors. They have all brought their own gifts to the role, including setting strategic direction, encouraging contributions and effective chairing of meetings. Despite their differences, they have also had some things in common, chiefly a passion for our subject and the way that it is communicated. Individually and collectively they have been truly excellent. They have left some very big shoes to fill.

My mention of picking up a pen was not metaphorical. I wrote the very first draft of this piece out in longhand. I even used a fountain pen. That pen's not special in the sense that it cost lots of money, although depending on your perspective it wasn't cheap: it cost a few tens of pounds, rather than a few tens of pence. It's also not special in the sense that I use it quite frequently, on an almost daily basis, now I come to think about it. But it is special in the sense that it was a present from a close relative. It's also special in that I've been using it for quite a few years, so we've been through some good times together and we've also been through some tough times.

One of the reasons I've stuck with using a pen is that I find it gives me time and space to think. Using a keyboard, my fingers often move more quickly than my thoughts. Sometimes, that's good. Especially when I'm trying to write a report on a subject that I know quite well. At other times, it results in a jumble of disorganised thoughts. Obviously, when using a keyboard and computer, it's easy to move things around, but creating some form of coherent narrative still feels like a battle.

Maybe the difficulty of changing handwritten text encourages me to slow my thinking down sufficiently for at least semi-coherent thoughts to be produced. Or maybe it's the nature of the physical act itself. I tend to attack the keyboard with a vengeance, striking each key with a definite purpose (although, given the noise this causes, I'm trying to moderate this behaviour so that I'm a better citizen in the modern world of open plan offices!). Using the pen is a much quieter, more fluid affair.

I find reading articles, especially those on the printed page rather than on a screen, is another way of finding time and space to think. Sometimes an article may directly help me with a problem I'm struggling with. More often, an article I've previously read feels as if it would be helpful and I drag half-remembered concepts from the depths of my memory (or, in some cases, look up the text). Occasionally, the act of reading seems to prompt something in my subconscious, entirely unconnected with the article at hand, but directly relevant to my problem. I've had all of these experiences when reading *Mathematics Today*; I hope other readers have too.

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The general media often portrays maths as a solo subject, with our hero toiling long into the night, their calculations (done with pencil and paper!) illuminated by a single desk lamp. There may be some aspects of maths that are like this but, in my experience, maths is more often a collaborative activity. In particular, recent years have seen a phenomenal growth in the application of maths to what were previously viewed as separate areas: maths in biology being a topic recently covered in *Mathematics Today*, for example.

It sounds obvious, and it is, so please forgive me for saying it. But, a key part of collaboration is identifying links between areas. These can be between ostensibly different subjects, in the case of maths and biology, or they can be between disciplines within the same subject. Regardless, in my experience, a big part of establishing those links is reading outside the narrow confines of the immediate challenge I'm facing. This, to my mind, is a key strength of *Mathematics Today*. We publish feature articles from across the broad swathe of maths. They include sufficient technical detail to make them interesting but not so much that they can only be read by specialist audiences.

Like maths in general, publication of *Mathematics Today* is very much a collaborative activity. As I take on the responsibility

of chairing the Editorial Board, I know I'll be supported by wonderful IMA staff at Catherine Richards House, especially Rebecca Waters, our excellent Editorial Officer. I know, too, that other board members will continue to provide enthusiasm, insight and wisdom. I also have confidence that contributors, both regular and occasional, will keep providing material of exceptional quality.

I very much hope that together we can continue to produce a magazine that gives people a place to stop and think, that helps establish links between the various disciplines in our subject and, above all, communicates mathematics passionately. I also hope that through *Mathematics Today* (and other activities of the IMA) non-mathematicians may discover the beauty and utility of our subject and remain spellbound, if only for a short while, as I was before the rolling-ball clock all those years ago.

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