

## ORIGINS OF THE CAMBRIDGE BLUE

Improved communications in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century made possible sporting competitions between such as Oxford and Cambridge, which led in turn to the adoption of different colours, if only to allow the umpire to recognise them.

The first sporting competition between the universities was on June 4<sup>th</sup> 1827 in a cricket match at Lord's. Both teams wore white with no distinguishing colour. The second competition was the first Boat Race at Henley-on-Thames on 10<sup>th</sup> June 1829 when Oxford wore dark blue and white striped shirts. The colour was in honour of Christ Church, Head of the River at the time, who provided no fewer than five members of the crew. It is well documented that this race is the origin of the Oxford dark blue. Cambridge wore white shirts with hunting pink ties or sashes in honour of Snow, the Captain of Cambridge and of the Lady Margaret (St John's College) Boat Club.

For the second race in 1836, according to contemporary accounts (e.g. Bell's Life), Cambridge wore white with no adornment. In 1837 and 1838 there were no intervarsity boat races but Cambridge raced against Leander Club and in both races they wore light blue and white striped shirts. For the third Boat Race in 1839 they adopted light blue, thereby establishing the accepted CUBC colour, and serially the Cambridge colour as each new sport has entered the intervarsity competitive programme.

The story behind the adoption of light blue did not appear in print until 1881, almost half a century after the event. Several of those directly involved had already died and memory is well known to 'drift' over time, particularly as long as five decades. We believe the story can be reconstructed reasonably accurately but conflicting evidence permits alternative interpretations of the details. According to page 3 of *Record* (for details see later) the move to publish an account of the races began with a seminal conversation in the umpire's boat in 1879, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Boat Race, when a proposal to hold a Jubilee Dinner was first mooted. Over the next few years several reports appeared describing how the light blue was selected. An examination of this information is the subject of this article.

### The selection of light blue in 1836 - Walter Bradford Woodgate

Woodgate was arguably the most colourful character of nineteenth century British rowing. Born in 1841, he was educated at Radley College, went up to Brasenose and rowed in the Oxford crews of both 1862 and 1863. He was a barrister, but rowing was his great love.

The suggestion that a dinner should be held to mark the 1829 race was repeated in 1880, and in the winter of that year a small group, including Woodgate, met in London to start planning. A large committee was elected with an executive committee of five from each university. On these committees sat, inter alia FM Arnold, JG Chambers, TS Egan, JHD Goldie, GGT Treherne and WB Woodgate, all associated in one way or another with this story. The dinner took place at the Freemasons' Tavern in the City of London on the eve of the next Boat Race, Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> April 1881. It seems that Woodgate was inspired to start writing an account of all the Boat Races. The first instalment appeared under the heading '*The History of the University Boat-Race*' (Woodgate, 1881) on the 9th April 1881 in the sporting journal *Land*

*and Water*. Later instalments had the heading ‘Old Blues and Their Battles’. The article contains the earliest known account of the origin of light blue for Cambridge, as below. [All quotations are in italics and notes are in square brackets].

*In this year [1836], if we recollect rightly, light blue was inaugurated as the Cantab colour of battle; and in a very haphazard manner. It happened thus: Oxford wore blue shirts, and had a blue flag in their bows. Cambridge wore white. Just as Cambridge were pushing off from Searle’s, someone remarked that they ought to have a ‘colour’ in the bows for the judge to identify them by. Mr. R. N. Phillips, of Christ’s, was standing by, and at once ran off to the nearest haberdasher in Lambeth. Some Etonian companion was with him, and suggested a bit of Eton ribbon (light blue) for luck. Mr. Phillips accepted this hint, and bought a tiny strip of light blue ribbon, which was placed in the bow of [the] Cambridge boat.*

The week following the Dinner *Land and Water* printed a suggestion that a record of the evening be prepared, which led to the publication two years later of *Record of the University Boat Race 1829-1880 and of the Commemoration Dinner 1881*, compiled by Treherne (OUBC 1859) and Goldie (CUBC 1869-72), referred to here as *Record*.

The story of RN Phillips and his blue ribbon appears in several places. In chronological order they include:

1. 1881 in *Land and Water*, as above.
2. 1883 on page 135 of *Record*.
3. 1888 on pages 36 and 37 of *Boating* (Woodgate, 1888)

The quotations are shown side by side in Table 1, along with dates and brief biographical details in Table 2.

4. 1927 on page 18 of *History of the Caius College Boat Club 1827-1927* by H Claughton Scott, 1927.

### 1881 and 1888 Woodgate

To take the Woodgate versions together, we feel that they are obviously the same story told seven years apart, and are a clear account of events, at least as Woodgate understood them. Phillips was unavailable for comment as he died in 1877.

### 1883 Record

*Record* (p 129 onwards) contains a history of the Boat Races under the heading ‘OLD BLUES AND THEIR BATTLES’. The introduction reads: *The following pages appeared in the columns of ‘Land and Water’ from the pen of an old Dark Blue (Mr. W. B. Woodgate, OUBC), and are reproduced (with slight alterations and additions) by the kind permission of Mr J. G. Chambers, CUBC.* Chambers and Woodgate were in opposing boats in 1862 and 1863: Oxford won both matches. Chambers was editor of *Land and Water* and a member of the executive committee. One might expect *Record* to contain ‘*Old Blues and their Battles*’ taken directly from *Land and Water*, but the “*slight alterations and additions*” is an understatement, and much of Woodgate’s text was reworked.

Significantly, except for the single mention above in *Record*, the Cambridge colour is always 'light blue'. Where *Land and Water* has a bit of **Eton ribbon (light blue)** for luck, *Record* says Mr. R. N. Phillips, of Christ's ... asked for a piece of **Eton blue ribbon or silk**. It is worth looking at the history of the phrase 'Eton blue'.

All the earliest references are in the context of Eton's Fourth of June celebrations or Election Saturday when the next year's scholars were announced. The earliest we can find is *Eton blue ribbon and cravat* on Election Saturday, 1851 (The Morning Post, Monday July 28 1851, p 4). References continue until about 1860 when Eton changed the description to 'light blue', which still holds today. Press reports still occasionally used it, mostly but not exclusively in the context of Eton. By the 1880s it had become more common, appearing in *Record* and elsewhere.

It is not clear who edited Woodgate's account, but Chambers, the editor of *Land and Water*, and Treherne and Goldie, compilers of *Record*, had all been at Eton and would have been very familiar with the description 'Eton blue'. Whoever took on that task, it is more than possible that when he read a bit of *Eton ribbon (light blue)* it became in his mind a piece of *Eton blue ribbon*, and he failed to appreciate that what had been in common parlance at Eton was unknown elsewhere. As well as introducing 'Eton blue', *Record* omits 'for luck' and also omits the anonymous Etonian accompanying Phillips. Those changes may appear trivial, but the weekly periodical *Land and Water* was soon forgotten while *Record* remained on bookshelves and in libraries and gave rise to the misleading belief that Cambridge had taken Eton blue in 1836.

On page 126 of *Record*, shortly before 'Old Blues and their Battles' there is a reference to the Phillips story, where it is described as *an amusing, and for all we know authentic story*. That presumably was a description by the compilers, Treherne and/or Goldie, and carries the strong implication that they had never heard it. Treherne was at Eton in the 1850s (under the name Thomas) and Goldie during the 1860s. They make no comment on the use of 'Eton blue' but they do give the lie to the belief (Byrne & Churchill, p 156) that Edmund Stanley, Captain of the Boats at Eton in 1835 and rowing at 3 in the Cambridge crew of 1836, had proposed light blue to Phillips. That story most likely arose as Etonian wishful thinking after the publication of *Record*.

### 1927 Frederic Arnold

In 1844 Frederic Arnold of Caius College rowed for CUBC against Leander at the Thames Regatta, and he stroked the Caius Eight which as Head of the Cam represented CUBC against a strong OUBC in the Grand Challenge at Henley. He was a member of the Dinner committee but did not attend it, probably because he was one of forty clerics *detained by the duties of Lent* (*Record* p 9).

The Caius BC history (Claughton Scott, p 18) prints the Phillips story exactly as in *Record*, followed by the words 'I might add' wrote Arnold, 'that I knew RN Phillips (who was for a long time the Secretary of the "Cambridge Rooms" at Searle's, Stangate) well and have

*heard him tell the story.*' Arnold here provides a welcome confirmation of the Phillips story and one might see his lack of further comment as tacit agreement that it was broadly correct.

Separately from the Phillips story, in 1882 Arnold contacted Merivale (4 in the 1829 CUBC crew) about their colour, who replied that the *Cambridge boat of 1829 were directed to wear their usual white linen shirts, with a pink necktie, but I think we were not quite uniform in our array. One man, I remember, said it was nonsense, and would not wear the pink at all. It is very possible that others wore their pink as a sash. ... Our University Captain, Snow, being himself of St John's, hinted that the Johnian uniform [ie: the pink of Lady Margaret Boat Club] should be adopted for the University race. The Trinity men demurred; the other two were nowhere; so by way of compromise the ordinary shirt was put in requisition, and the crew agreed to wear the pink tie in compliment to the captain.* (Claughton Scott, p 17)

Merivale's letter also appears on page 125 of *Record*.

### Independent evidence

Is there then any independent evidence linking Cambridge with light blue in 1836? The answer is a resounding "yes." Augustus Granville, the 1836 Cambridge Captain (stroke) in a letter printed in *Record* (page 126) wrote:

*April 10 1882. There can be no doubt that we rowed in 1836 in 'light blue'. The ribbon I wore has till quite lately been preserved by Mrs Granville, and it has unfortunately been mislaid. We have all along trimmed our boys' jerseys with the same colour, and do so still with few exceptions.*

Based on the above, what can be said about the choice of light blue in 1836?

- Cambridge wore plain white shirts in 1836, as they had, with a pink tie or sash, in 1829.
- There was discussion of the colour, as in 1829, and we may suppose that crew members were reluctant to wear the colour of a college club other than their own.
- A link between light blue and Cambridge is proven by the existence of Granville's ribbon in the 1836 boat.
- The phrase 'Eton blue' appears at Eton around 1850. It was not known elsewhere for some thirty years and Phillips did not ask for it.
- The choice of *Eton ribbon (light blue) for luck* probably had little to do with Eton, and everything to do with it not being a Cambridge college club colour. Purely incidentally it was also a contrast to the dark Oxford blue.

We feel that Woodgate's story about Phillips is clear, consistent and credible.

## Caius and Thomas Egan

Thomas Egan, also of Caius College, played a significant part in Cambridge rowing and coxed the first three victorious Cambridge crews of 1836, '39 and '40. He took Caius to the Head of the Cam in 1840, '41 and '44 - Caius were next head of the river in 1987. *Record* (p 136) says of him: *The name of TS Egan is perhaps more familiar than any other in the Boat Race annals, whether in his capacity of coxswain, coach, Henley Umpire or editor of Bell's Life.* He was on the Dinner committee, and attended it.

Claughton Scott in 1927 mentions the belief that the Caius Boat Club gave its colour to CUBC in 1836.

*These facts then appear beyond dispute – that the Caius Boat Club flag, as early as 1829, consisted of the College Arms, with the Club's crest and motto worked on a light blue silk ground, and that it was not until seven years later that the University adopted light blue as its colour. One cannot help thinking that the adoption of this colour by Cambridge may have been due, directly or indirectly, to the fact that three Caians were in the 1836 crew. The adoption by the University [ie: University Boat Club] of this colour caused Caius to change its colours by taking a blue and white diagonal stripe instead of the plain blue. (Claughton Scott, p 18)*

It was not unreasonable for the 1836 boat to have honoured three Caians in the crew, but it was not following any 1829 precedent. There were also three Trinity men in the crew: two from First Trinity and one from Second Trinity. That made Caius the most represented Boat Club, but it hardly makes a convincing argument that the blue came from Caius. We also read:

*It has already been pointed out that the Caius flag of 1829 had the College arms embroidered on light blue silk, and that part of the Club uniform consisted of a blue coat. None the less a tradition grew up, both in Caius and elsewhere, that our boat club was given the right to use light blue in its colours in honour of the achievements of the College crew of 1844. (Claughton Scott, p 17)*

*Record* (page 9) supports this claim, saying that *the Caius crew, which in 1844 had, as Head of the River, been deputed, in answer to a challenge from the town [presumably Cambridge], to represent their University ... in commemoration of which the Caius College Boat Club was authorized to add the University light blue to their club colours.* Additionally (p 147) *the Caius Eight ... were the sole opponents of Oxford for the Grand Challenge at Henley.* It is not clear whether *Record* simply repeated the Caius tradition or if there is documentary evidence of this award. If Caius had received this honour from CUBC in 1844, the idea that the college gave its colour to the University in 1836 must fail, and vice versa. It also strongly suggests that the 'light blue silk ground' of the original Caius Wherry Club was different from the CUBC colour.

However there are two good reasons for believing that the CUBC light blue did not come from Caius in 1836 nor was given to it in 1844.

First is the lack of evidence for it. The 1836 story is introduced with *One cannot help thinking that* and the 1844 one with *a tradition grew up*. An argument from speculation needs some positive evidence before being taken seriously.

Secondly, Egan coxed both the 1844 boats above and Arnold was in them, probably at stroke. As Caius men they would have been very proud of the honour had it been conferred, and since they both contributed to the Caius Boat Club Book would have mentioned it in words stronger than *a tradition grew up*. More significantly, if the 1844 story were true, Arnold would not have endorsed the Phillips story as he did. Additionally, Egan coxed both the 1836 and 1844 boats, and certainly knew where the light blue had come from.

It must be concluded that the claim that the light blue came from Caius is tenuous, to say the least.

### Eton blue

One of us (FG), formerly River Master at Eton, researched Eton blue and wrote a paper on the subject. A copy is with the Eton Archives, at the Henley River and Rowing Museum, item RRM/2225 and in the CUBC archives at the Cambridge University Library. Eton can shed some little light on the colour, though sadly not on the events of 1836.

Eton has long been associated with blue and as early as the 1820s there is a report of cricketers wearing *the blue tie of Eton* (Byrne & Churchill, p 198). We have already seen that the phrase 'Eton blue' does not occur outside Eton until about 1880 and it is all but certain that a haberdasher would not have recognised the description half a century earlier.

Then there is the evidence of EC Devereux, a member of a family in the Eton High Street supplying hats and clothing to the school. Starting in 1860, when school colours were first introduced, they kept a sample of each one. In 1935 Devereux published *Life's memories of Eton and Eton Colours*, of which the first colour plate, 'Eton blue', may be the oldest (1860) reliable version of Eton's colour. It is in fact green. A number of nineteenth century artefacts, such as oars, and a magnificent jacket worn in 1824 by WE Gladstone, later the prime minister, confirm the colour.

### What is Cambridge blue?

It needs to be said that both the Cambridge and Eton colours are 'light blue'. Colours arose from the sporting necessity of identifying opposing crews and teams, and surviving artefacts confirm that the description has been interpreted quite widely, as it still is. By way of example we have one mid-Victorian CUBC sample (the cannons used at Cambridge for starting the Bumps) still extant, and this is far more blue than the traditional CUBC colour (see Colour Charts). Then in the middle of the twentieth century Alf Twinn, the much beloved Cambridge boatman, coach and mentor for 50 years (1934-1984) gradually made the colour more green, reputedly to ensure that CUBC could be distinguished from the colours of "them Rugger b\*\*\*s", but serendipitously taking the colour gradually back to the Eton original. Hence the current Cambridge and Eton versions of blue are once again virtually the same.

The current colour used on CUBC blades is shown in the Colour Charts. It is almost identical to the official Cambridge blue defined by the Cambridge Administration. (See link in references)

Very much the same can be said about Eton where it is still common to see a variety of different hues. There is also persistent evidence that Devereux's green colour was in some sense favoured. It was felt that the colour looks dull and uninspiring on paper, and one of us (FG, as River Master at Eton) tried various shades between it and the school's first VIII blazer to arrive at a colour which was well received. In 2004 this colour was defined as the current Eton blue.

It is a remarkable coincidence that both colours after varying widely for the best part of two centuries, have recently converged independently onto almost identical shades of green. Alf Twinn, with his fiercely protective and down-to-earth policy of seeing his rowers right would probably have been proud that he was also moving the iconic colour back to its supposed origins.

Because of the long time interval (almost half a century) between events and when they were written down, the evidence can be contradictory, sometimes of a hearsay nature, and often in terms of what was not said. A degree of interpretation is inevitable, but we feel confident in presenting our conclusions below.

- Light blue was first adopted by Cambridge for the 1836 Boat Race.
- With some regret, we believe that the two stories associating Caius Boat Club with the colour are not supportable. We accept that Caius blue, both then and now, was coincidentally very similar to Cambridge and Eton blue.
- The Phillips story as told by Woodgate is reliable and consistent.
- The 'light blue' ribbon suggested by an unknown Etonian and bought by Phillips was adopted because it was not a Cambridge college boat club colour. Its connection with the school was incidental, as was the fact that it contrasted well with the dark Oxford blue.
- Over the years both the Cambridge and Eton colours have changed, but are now virtually indistinguishable. If we accept the Phillips story, that is how it should be.

Frank Grenfell (former River Master, Eton College)

John Marks (former Honorary Treasurer, CUBC)

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## References

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*Record - 1883 Record of the University Boat Race 1829-1880 and of the Commemoration Dinner 1881*. compiled by Treherne GGT and Goldie JHD. Rickers & Sons, London.  
Now available as a Nabu Public Domain Reprint ISBN 9 781143 628474  
The book includes WB Woodgate's 'Old Blues and Their Battles' taken from *Land and Water* and edited by JG Chambers

Claughton Scott H 1927 *History of the Caius College Boat Club 1827-1927*. CUP, Cambridge.

Woodgate WB, 1881 *The History of the University Boat-Race* in the sporting journal *Land and Water* ed Chambers JC, 9<sup>th</sup> April 1881

Woodgate WB 1888 *Boating* Longmans, Green & Co. London  
(Published as volume 18 of the *Badminton Library of Sports and Pastimes* edited by the Duke of Beaufort.) The text of this book is now available online at  
[http://www.archive.org/stream/boatingb00woodrich/boatingb00woodrich\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/boatingb00woodrich/boatingb00woodrich_djvu.txt)

Cambridge University Administration (for colours) link:  
<http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/communications/services/identityguidelines/guidelines-colour.pdf>

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Thanks and acknowledgements.



## Table 1. Three versions of the Phillips Story.

9 April 1881 'Land and Water' Woodgate

In this year [1836], if we recollect rightly, light blue was inaugurated as the Cantab colour of battle; and in a very haphazard manner. It happened thus: Oxford wore blue shirts, and had a blue flag in their bows. Cambridge wore white. Just as Cambridge were pushing off from Searle's, someone remarked that they ought to have a 'colour' in the bows for the judge to identify them by. Mr. R. N. Phillips, of Christ's, was standing by, and at once ran off to the nearest haberdasher in Lambeth. Some Etonian companion was with him, and suggested a bit of Eton ribbon (light blue) for luck. Mr. Phillips accepted this hint, and bought a tiny strip of light blue ribbon, which was placed in the bow of Cambridge boat [sic]. Since that day this colour has been recognised as the Cantab racing colour, and Oxford blue has been gradually deepened in hue for contrast and for trade haberdashery purposes, till of late it has become almost an indigo.

1888 'Boating' Woodgate

It is said that 'light blue' was on this occasion [1836] first adopted by Cambridge. Certainly in 1829 the Cantab crew wore pink, while Oxford sported blue. The late Mr. R. N. Phillips, of Christ's, used to tell the writer that he it was who fortuitously founded light blue on this occasion. He was on the raft at Searle's when the Cantab crew were preparing to start, either for the race or for a day's practice: the race so far as recollection of Mr. Phillips' narrative serves the writer. One of the crew said, 'We have no colours.' Mr. Phillips ran off to buy some ribbon in Stangate. An old Etonian accompanied him, and suggested 'Eton ribbon for luck.' It was bought, it came in first, and was adhered to in later years by Cambridge.

Notes: Stangate and Lambeth are effectively the same, on the south bank of the Thames opposite the Houses of Parliament. The Great Fire of 1834 burnt down Parliament, and the foundation stone of the present building was laid in 1840

1883 'Record' Treherne & Goldie / Chambers?

It was in 1836 that Cambridge first adopted light blue, and that, so it seems, rather by hazard. They were on the point of pushing off from Searle's at Westminster, when somebody remarked that the boat had no colour in the bow. One person suggested one colour, and another another. At the last moment the late Mr. R. N. Phillips, of Christ's, a well-known oarsman in those days, ran over to a haberdasher's close by, and asked for a piece of Eton blue ribbon or silk. This was produced, and the crew adopted it *con amore*. Since those days Cambridge has stuck to light blue; while Oxford for the sake of contrast, have rather deepened their shade of the same colour.

Table 2. Dramatis Personae.

<b>Boat Race</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Dates</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>Boat Club</b>		
1844, 45	FM Arnold	1823 -1898	Rugby	Caius	C	
1862, 63	JG Chambers	1843 -1883	Eton	First Trinity	C	Editor Land & Water
1836 39 40 42 44	TS Egan	1815 -1893	Rottingdean	Caius	C	Editor Bell's Life
1869 70 71 72	JHD Goldie	1849-1896	Eton	LMBC	C	Co-compiler 'Report'
1836	AKB Granville	1816 -1884	St Paul's	Corpus		
1829	C Merivale	1808-1893	Harrow	LMBC	C	
–	RN Phillips	1807-1877	Sheffield Grammar	(Christ's)		
1829	W Snow	1807 -1886	Eton	LMBC		
1836, 1839	E Stanley	1818 - 1875	Eton	Jesus		
1859 Oxford	GGT Treherne	1837 - 1925	Eton	Balliol	C	Co-compiler 'Report'
62 63 Oxford	WB Woodgate	1841-1920	Radley	Brasenose	C	

C means on the Dinner committee

Table 3

Colour references.

	<b>RGB</b>	<b>CYMK</b>	<b>Html</b>
<b>Cambridge</b>			
CUBC NCS S 2020-G	<b>155 190 169</b>	<b>41 07 37 01</b>	<b>#9bbea9</b>
Cam Admin (Pantone 557)	<b>163 193 173</b>	<b>48 04 35 10</b>	<b>#a3c1ad</b>
CUBC Vic	080 138 157		
Mid Victorian cannon for the bumps.			
<b>Eton 2004.</b>			
NCS S 2020-G10Y	<b>160 190 162</b>	<b>39 07 41 01</b>	<b>#a0bea2</b>
In 2002 Eton's blades were painted with Dulux 08GG 66/098, now 10GG 66098 'Frosted Green'			
<b>Eton 1860</b>			
NCS S 2010-G60Y	<b>190 192 169</b>	<b>23 13 34 04</b>	<b>#bec0a9</b>
Wickes 3105 or 3115			
<b>Caius.</b>			
Dulux medium 1029. Now 2060B50G			
Boat Club oars 2010	128 175 166		

Colours in **bold** are correct having been accurately scanned or taken from manufacturers' data sheets. Other colours are approximate being taken from home photographs or scans, and compared with known colours.

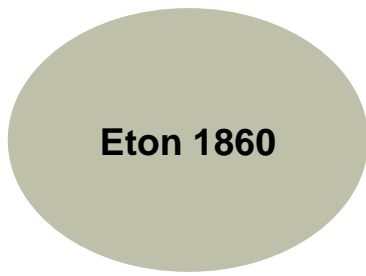
**Cam admin** is taken from the Cambridge administration website – see: <http://www.admin.cam.ac.uk/offices/communications/services/identityguidelines/guidelines-colour.pdf>

**Eton 2004** is the contemporary Eton blue defined in 2004.

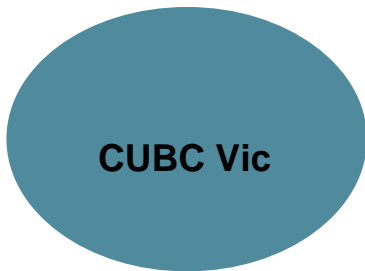
**Eton 1860** is the colour of the first colour plate in Devereux's book

For more information on the **NCS** colour scheme see <http://www.ncscolour.co.uk/>

Colour Charts. . Based on RGB values (used for website colours).

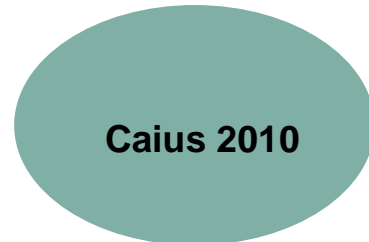
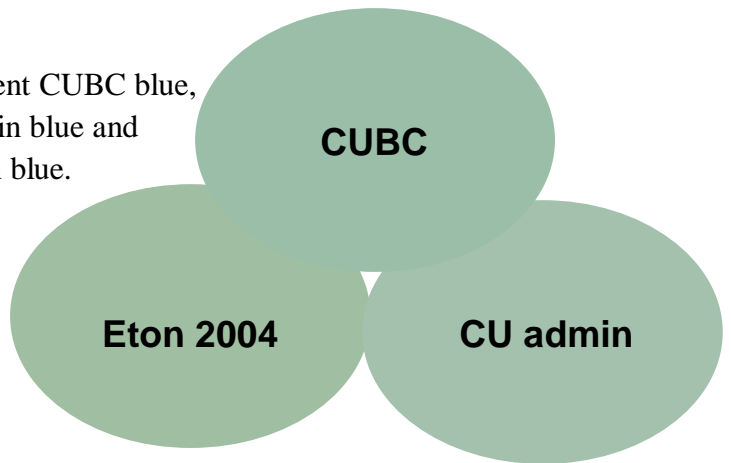


Eton 1860: the colour in Devereux' book.



CUBC Vic from the 19<sup>th</sup> century CUBC cannon.

Current CUBC blue, Admin blue and Eton blue.



Caius BC blue 2010

**Please note** – the above colours are as per the RGB values quoted on page 11. They will appear differently on different screens, and when printed.

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Girton College Jenny Blackhurst (Assistant Librarian}

NCS Colour Centre <http://www.ncscolour.co.uk/> Marilyn Sturgeon for providing information about the Eton colours. 'Dulux' (or ICI) paints are available in NCS colours.

Zoological Society of London's library: Emma Milnes for providing access to past copies of 'Land and Water'.