

# Marking an epochal discovery



On February 28, 1953, Francis Crick and James Watson strolled into the *Eagle*, their local pub in Cambridge, England, and announced to all and sundry present they had “discovered the secret of life.” They had solved the structure of DNA, heralding the dawn of a new age in molecular biology and genomics.

Starting February 28, 2013, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory hosted a 4-day meeting on the 60-year anniversary of that momentous day, a celebration of the announcement that changed the nature of biological research, and a future-looking survey of work yet to be done.

In fact CSHL had played its own role in the dissemination of the discovery. After the publication of Watson and Crick’s landmark manuscript in *Nature* earlier in 1953, Watson was invited to present the paper at that summer’s Quantitative Biology symposium, focusing on “Viruses.”

It was the first presentation of the paper to the global research community, forever associating CSHL with the double helix, and of course with Watson, who would move to the Laboratory to be-

come its director in 1968 (while, for the time, retaining his professorship at Harvard).

To commemorate the occasion, the CSHL bar in the Blackford building, *Winship’s*, was redecorated to look like a replica of the *Eagle*, including an authentic-looking sign outside the bar and photographs from the period decorating its interior walls. On entering the bar, Watson was clearly taken with it, and walked around nodding his approval and commenting on the photographs here and there.



The meeting itself, “From Base Pair to Body Plan,” was organized by Alex Gann, Dean of the Watson School of Biological Sciences, and Professor Rob Martienssen, with help from Meetings & Courses Executive Director David Stewart.

Nobel Prize winners Christiane Nüsslein-Volhard, Elizabeth Blackburn, Carol Greider, Craig Mello and Sir John Gurdon, as well as many other notable scientists, were among those attending.

While the meeting was held as a celebration, it was “as much about looking forward as looking back,” said Stewart.

Speakers detailed the progress of their current research and some speculated on where it was going. It was, as Stewart noted, “a modern scientific meeting, where a lot of new ideas were discussed.”

There were many lively debates, something that again quite clearly pleased Watson, who is known for his vigorous and unapologetic discourse.

Even within the forward-looking theme of the meeting there was time enough for a one-hour session late on Saturday afternoon that saw Watson, Sydney Brenner, Matthew Meselson and Walter Gilbert take the podium for some reminiscing. Speaking for about 10 minutes each, they recalled the heady days surrounding the announcement of the structure and the atmosphere in the years immediately following it.

“Someone should pay us to sit in a room and talk about this for a week,” said Meselson, only slightly tongue-in-cheek. “I’m serious, because in a few years we’ll be gone and so will these stories and details of research.”

On March 1st a Gala at Oheka Castle on Long Island capped the anniversary celebration. Over 300 scientists and friends of CSHL attended the event feting Watson and the discovery of the double helix structure of DNA.

**Edward Brydon**



Top: Christiane Nüsslein-Volhard

Above: Sir John B. Gurdon

Left: From left to right; Sydney Brenner, James Watson, Giorgio Bernardi, Walter Schaffner and Walter Gilbert

