

DNA discovery pioneer James Watson pays Cambridge tribute to colleague Francis Crick

By [chris elliot](#) | Posted: June 10, 2016



Controversial scientist James Watson returned to the city where he [cracked the secret of DNA](#) more than 60 years ago – to pay tribute to the man who helped him do it.

In 1953, Prof Watson and fellow researcher Francis Crick, working in the city's famous Cavendish Laboratory, unravelled the structure of deoxyribonucleic acid, the genetic material that determines hereditary characteristics such as eye and hair colour.

After the 'double helix' breakthrough the two men famously went for a celebratory pint in The Eagle pub, where the story goes that regulars heard them talking about discovering 'the secret of life', and thought they were drunk. The duo's work won them and collaborator Maurice Wilkins the Nobel Prize in 1962.

Crick died in 2004, and yesterday his erstwhile colleague came back to Cambridge's MRC (Medical Research Council) Laboratory of Molecular Biology to deliver a special talk about him, marking the centenary of Crick's birth.

Prof Watson, 88, who has [sparked controversy](#) in recent years for his allegedly racist views, worked as a visitor at the MRC Unit, the precursor to the LMB, between 1951 and 1953, and also in 1955-56 and 1961.

Crick was a founding member of the LMB when it opened in 1962, remaining there until 1976, working alongside another future Cambridge Nobel Laureate, Sydney Brenner.

To give the talk, organised by Gonville & Caius College, Prof Watson came to England from America, where he

is Chancellor Emeritus at New York's Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory.

Prof Watson told his audience "Francis could solve problems, could think – he was the smartest person I've met in my entire life.



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Emphasising how he believed Crick had more scientific insight than himself, Prof Watson said: "Crick saw anti-parallel chains: I saw base-pairing."

The MRC lab is one of the world's leading research institutes. [Discoveries](#) and inventions developed there since the 1953 breakthrough, such as DNA sequencing and methods to determine the structure of proteins, have revolutionised all areas of biology.

A spokeswoman said: "Our scientists work to advance understanding of biological processes at the molecular level. This information will help us to understand the workings of complex systems, such as the immune system and the brain, and solve key problems in human health."

Claims of racism were levelled at Prof Watson in 2007, after he said in an interview with The Sunday Times that while people may like to think all races are born with equal intelligence, those "who have to deal with black employees find this not true."

He also put his [Nobel Prize medal](#) up for auction, but was later given it back by the Russian billionaire who bought it.

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