

You know you are getting old when...

I am sure you know the 'you are getting old when...' format of jokes:

- You know you are old when the candles cost more than the cake.
- You know you are old when you're told to slow down by your doctor and not the police.
- You know you are old when the only females who pursue you are mosquitoes.

And so on.

I have just discovered another one.

One of the pleasures of university life is that we spend much of our time working with energetic young people. The atmosphere this creates can be invigorating, and for much of the time it shields those of us getting longer in the tooth from noticing that fact. It seems like only yesterday that I was a postdoc too.

But sometimes, we get reminders. Often they come from the young scientists themselves, when that say something like 'a really old paper' when referring to one that you remember being published, or who use a word in a social context, whose current meaning you realize you do not quite understand. And sometimes, these reminders come from elsewhere, outside the lab, unexpected.

One of those has just reached me. In connection to my writing an invited paper on synthetic biology in D'Arcy Thompson's time and our own, I was searching for modern-era papers on synthetic morphology to see if I could make any close connections between anything in D'Arcy Thompson's *On Growth and Form*, and the contents of a recent paper. In the course of this, I came across a paper by Gabriele Gamelsberger entitled *Synthetic Morphology: A Vision of Engineering Biological Form*. The title looked very promising so, without noticing the title of the journal in which it appeared, I clicked on the 'full text' link (see 'links' below). The abstract made clear that this was a study of my own 2008 paper in *J. Anat*, in which I proposed the creation of synthetic biology as a field of study and outlined what it might achieve. The paper was an analysis of the likely foundations of my ideas, and how they had been picked up by others, and where the field might go in the future. I admit that this attention was in a way very flattering. But the killer detail was the title of the journal: *Journal of the History of Biology*.

Until now, I had always considered all of my research – I mean the whole lot I have ever done - to

be ‘current’ and part of modern biology. Seeing something written later than half way through my research career to date as being ‘history of biology’ was a bit of a shock! One of those transition moments, like someone who trips up being described not as having fallen over, but as having ‘had a fall’ (a phrase used only of the old, for some reason).

I have not yet shared the existence of this paper with the rest of the lab: I shall save it for when they look as if they could do with a (another) good laugh at my expense!

Jamie Davies, Edinburgh, August 2022

Links: Gramelsberger G. Synthetic Morphology: A Vision of Engineering Biological Form. *J Hist Biol.* 2020 Jun;53(2):295-309. doi: 10.1007/s10739-020-09601-w.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32358710/>