

FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

TWICE A DAY, the bronze bell of the *SS Terra Nova* lets loose a fearsome sound when it is rung from its position on a stairway landing in the Scott Polar Research Institute (SPRI). The bell, which once belonged to the ship that carried Captain Scott on his ill-fated journey to the South Pole, has been used every working day since 1952 to call Institute staff and students to coffee at 10:30am and to tea at 4pm.

They take their tea seriously at SPRI. A trolley is rolled into the museum, laden with coffee or tea pots, a piggy bank, and sugar and milk. Blue tablecloths are placed over two of the display cases, temporarily concealing 19th-century British Arctic Medals and an Arctic fox collar, among other things. Staff come in either clutching their own mugs or ready to use one of the dainty tea cups and saucers found on the trolley's bottom shelf. On a good day, a box of Jaffa cakes appears.

Dr Piers Vitebsky, Head of Anthropology and Russian Northern Studies at SPRI, was among the first to arrive for a 4pm tea on a recent Tuesday. As he collected two tea cups, he nodded when



Twice a day, the bell of the *SS Terra Nova*, below, is rung to call Scott Polar Research Institute staff and students to coffee and tea gatherings.

asked if the gatherings are popular. Reindeer herders – who have come from afar to participate in seminars Vitebsky organises – have been known to make a specific request. “They ask, ‘Can we have the seminar at a time when we can hear the tea bell?’” Vitebsky says.

SPRI Archivist Naomi Boneham, who brought her own mug, is a regular attendee. “It’s a nice break and you get to see everyone else and catch up with what everyone is working on,” she says. And gossip? “Yes,” she says, a twinkle in her eye. “There might be a bit of gossip.”

Professor Julian Dowdeswell remembers attending teas when he was a graduate student at the Institute several decades ago. Now, as Director of SPRI, he finds the teas not only enjoyable, but useful. “A lot of things can be sorted out over a cup of tea,” he says. “It’s an informal way for me to talk with staff – I can find them and they can find me.”

There isn’t a chair in sight, and Professor Dowdeswell likes it that way. “Standing up for tea and coffee is very good for meeting everybody,” he says. “Otherwise, people have the tendency to sit in the same places every day and don’t mix.”

While the teas are occasionally used to make announcements to staff

– a £994,500 Heritage Lottery Fund Grant to renovate the Institute’s polar museum was announced at a tea in December – the real value is found in conversations.

Research Associate Toby Benham, who had joined a group of seven standing around one of the covered display cases, says he’s learned a lot about his colleagues while sipping tea together. “You quite often get chatting to someone about their research and learn something relevant to what you’re doing,” he says. “You get that synchronicity.”

That day, the insights were more along the lines of who preferred ‘caju squirrel’ or ‘chilli and chocolate’ flavoured crisps – two packs were being shared around – but Benham wasn’t bothered. “It’s a good social thing.”

For the record, polar researchers prefer chilli and chocolate crisps.

