

Newport Outdoor Group (YHA)



Editors

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Web Site

<http://walk.to/nogs>

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**Get
The
Outdoor
Habit!**

City of towers, spires, domes and dreams

A weekend trip to Oxford from 14th to 16th November 2008

This is the diary notes of the trip enjoyed by 4 NOGS, namely Sue Shea, Jo Bradford, Richard Weeks and Brian Turner.

Friday 14th

Prompt evening departure by car. A smooth journey, door to door service, arrived at Oxford YH at approx. 7.30 pm. This is located on the west side of the city centre next to the railway station. Evening jaunt in the city centre (on foot of course). The city was a very noisy, boisterous place; every eating venue that we looked at was overcrowded. Many places had bouncers on the street entrances. Eventually, we settle on "Old Orleans" (quite refined) where we had an enjoyable supper, followed by a walk to burn off a few calories. We walked along one of the many fast flowing rivers that thread their way through Oxford. This one had a couple of narrow canal boats moored up; with flower pots, bicycles, etc on the tops, so obviously used as mobile residences. The streets in this area west of the city centre were lined with neat Victorian terraced houses, brick built with interesting architectural features, built for 19th Century factory workers, now used by aspiring lower middle class folk and students.

Saturday 15th

Brilliant sunny morning, stiff westerly breeze, good to be alive! After an excellent full English Breakfast, a conference took place in the hostel restaurant regarding the proposed itinerary. BT had an elderly guide book of Oxford, with a map and a list of recommended places to visit, complete with grid references, this was accepted, so off we went, heading east, into the sunshine.

The first visit of note was St. Michael's Church and its Saxon built tower from the top of which we had fine views over the city and beyond (see the photo below, which appears courtesy of *Sacred Destinations*, online at www.sacred-destinations.com),



Including Boar's Hill (future hill walking opportunities maybe!!) Then on to Broad Street which lives up to its name (yes, it is!), past the colourful street market and T.I.C. and into Trinity College for a walk through the tranquil quadrangles and gardens. At this point, it was around mid-day and the sun was still shining, so we made a bee-line for the Botanical Gardens. These should have been easy to find but the aforesaid map was quite small and BT erroneously led the way down a cul-de-sac, where we encountered a group of lady walkers equally lost and seeking the gardens. Having glanced at BT's map and itinerary, complete with grid references, they expressed their admiration – at least, that is how it appeared to me. Together we found our way to the main gate, through the inevitable Gift Shop, and into the beautiful gardens which were cleverly laid out with formal beds for flowers and shrubs, and many magnificent specimen trees, together with water features and many other items of interest. Most of the trees and shrubs and clumps of flowers were labeled with botanical and common names, and in the case of the trees, the date of planting. Some of the trees were more than 150 years old. Another fast flowing river bounded the eastern part of the gardens, which was a truly delightful place. After strolling around, we decided to forget the rest of the proposed itinerary, we were foot-weary and hungry and needed re-fuelling.

A late lunch was taken in the efficient Mövenpic Café, followed by a visit to the world renowned Ashmoleum Museum, which is truly marvelous. We stayed there gazing at the many exhibitions until throwing out time, 5 pm.

Sue, Jo and Richard decided to attend the ghost Story Trail. Two ghost walks were advertised, but we three opted for the shorter walk as we wanted to get back to the hostel for a refreshment break first. We gathered outside the Visitor's Information Centre

shop along with about 100 others. At £6 a head this must be a lucrative "moon-lighter" for "Bill Spectre", our host for the walk. Bill was suitably dressed in black top hat and Sherlock Holmes style overcoat, and as he is an actor by profession, he was able to project his voice to the back of the crowd. He dramatically retold the ghostly tales standing on folding steps, with magic trick embellishments, while leading us around the back streets. He also called for audience participation and there were a number of willing

volunteers. It was a fun and interesting experience. From the centre we walked back to the hostel but on to a quiet pub beside a river and relaxed with a drink, whilst watching the X Factor on TV.

So what of BT? I was of a too nervous disposition to listen to ghost stories, so I went along to the Shelonian Theatre for an evening concert by the Oxford Philomusica [*sic*] Orchestra, performing an extravaganza which was wonderfully exuberant. The theatre was designed in 1691 by Christopher Wren when he was 31 years old, one of the earliest architectural commissions when he was described, at that time, as an astronomer and amateur architect! If this building was designed by an amateur then I say, “Bring back amateurism”!! The design is based on the lines of a Roman Theatre, and I was up in the God’s with a bird’s eye view of proceedings.

Sunday 16th

More cloudy today. Before I continue with these diary notes, I had better explain that the Oxford YH is purposely built with generally 6 bunk beds per room and bathroom/shower en-suite; the layout is hotel style. I was awake before daylight (around 6.30 am) and quietly paid a visit to the bathroom, switching on only the bathroom light. After my ablutions I stepped out of the bathroom and there ahead of me was a person with long dark hair dressed in a nightie or flimsy nightshirt. There was no way of knowing if the person was male or female (or in between). To say that I was surprised is the understatement of the year. I managed to mumble, “Good Morning” and slid past the figure to the safety of my bed space. The figure briefly disappeared into the bathroom whilst I hurriedly discarded my pyjamas and hastily dressed. The figure re-appeared and started to dress in the space adjoining the bathroom, blocking my escape route to the corridor. By this time I was 90% certain that the person was female. With eyes averted, I busied myself tidying up my bed space, folding my bed sheets etc., ready for dumping at Reception. As soon as the mystery figure, now dressed in blue, moved away from the my escape route, I bolted and sped to the restaurant for a coffee to settle my nerves, thinking, “that was a close shave”. Maybe the reader will think that I have kept my cool, and further exploration may have proved interesting – but honestly, I am not that sort of fellow!! I drank my coffee in the garden and then went back into the restaurant to have breakfast and there was the figure in blue, long dark hair, good complexion, good curves! I bucked up courage and asked the lady (definitely a lady!) if I could sit nearby for breakfast, and we chatted for some time., I won’t bore you with the details suffice to say that on Saturday evening when the dorm was empty, Reception had given the lady the wrong key and it was not until the lady was in bed and males started to come into the dorm that she realised her predicament and decided to stay put and make a break for it as early as possible on the Sunday morning. So there you are, folks – women do frequent men’s dorms occasionally, and in this case accidentally, but in all my years of hostelling this is the first time that I have slept with a female stranger – in separate bunks, of course!!! When the other NOGS showed up for breakfast, recent past experiences were exchanged and the day’s itinerary discussed. We decided to walk to Christ College Meadows. On the way we branched off to spend some time at the castle, where they had an open exhibition of marvellous large aerial colour photographs taken at various places around the world, showing unique natural features, beautifully done. This is one of the exciting things about Oxford – it is full of unusual sightings that comes across unexpectedly when wandering about.

We walked the Meadows taking in lovely views of the colleges, followed by another riverside walk. We had a stop at the “head of the River” pub for a light lunch and liquid refreshment, where we again saw the group of lady walkers from the Botanical Gardens. They cheekily asked me which grid square we were in, to which I replied, “we are off the map!”. The weather was now slightly inclement but we continued our walk in the rain along the River Thames and to my delight there were several eights rowing like mad. We enquired, of some stewards with stop watches, what was happening, and it turned out that on Sundays various colleges compete on a trial basis. We gave encouragement to the crews and clapped and cheered them along, especially the women’s crews. As I said, we were off the map. Had we continued following the river, we would have ended up in Maidenhead. Fortunately, we realised in time that we needed to take the road back into the city. We strolled along Iffley Road passing the University Sports Centre where Roger Bannister, on the evening of 6th May 1954, ran the mile in 3 minutes 59.4 seconds – another great amateur!

It was a gloomy afternoon weather-wise, so we decided once we were back in the City to head for the Natural Science Museum, hoping that we could have a comfort stop there and then examine the specimens on display. Unfortunately, upon entering we were told that they had no loo’s and the nearest ones were in Blackwell’s Bookshop on the north side of Broad Street. We hurried across. The loo’s were free, but the books were expensive – even the second hand ones, and we succumbed; after all it was near to Xmas and books make good presents.

Back we went to the Natural Science Museum, another fascinating place, the piece de resistance being the framed blackboard upon which Einstein wrote a number of formulae whilst giving a lecture on Relativity in Oxford during the 1931 (see photo, right). Again, we stayed until throwing out time then back to the YHA for a cuppa and Welsh cakes, and we were soon homeward bound.

It was decided to stop on the way home for a “last supper” – I was told in no uncertain terms “not in a motorway service station”. So we diverted to Hungerford (of bitter memories). Before we hit the town proper, we came across “Grille 5” (the five senses). Again, re-assuredly expensive but we enjoyed the meal and even found enough money for a tip for the waiters.

All in all an excellent varied weekend, full of interest and thoroughly enjoyed by all. Now we have done the exploration, perhaps we could plan another trip and walk Boar’s Hill or maybe the keen cyclists could take their bikes and ride the tow-paths.

