

O Honors at xford

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY LYNETTE LOBBAN



• *Summer study at England's "OU" gives Sooners a new window on the world—intellectually and geographically.*

continued



Built in the 1700s as part of the “new” library, the circular dome of the Radcliffe Camera is one of the most recognizable architectural features at Oxford.

“It might be an old and an old-fashioned city, with inconvenient buildings and narrow streets where the passersby squabbled foolishly about the right of way, but her foundations were set upon the holy hills and her spires touched heaven.”

—Dorothy L. Sayers describing Oxford in *Gaudy Night*, 1936.

When Steve Gillon became dean of the Honors College in 1997, one of the first things on his agenda was to introduce University of Oklahoma students to the “other OU”—the one across the Atlantic. As a lecturer at Oxford University in England, Gillon had seen American professors bring students over for the summer, but felt these excursions fell short of the true Oxford experience.

“Steve would see these universities come in and basically use Oxford as a backdrop for their regular classes, which was fine,” recalls Melanie Wright, curriculum director for OU’s Joe C. and Carole Kerr McClendon Honors College, “but it wasn’t a true Oxford experience. Steve called it ‘Oxford by osmosis.’”

In addition to the crooked streets and hallowed halls, Gillon, now resident historian for The History Channel and OU history professor, wanted to expose his students to the very personal teaching style unique to Oxford and Cambridge. In ad-

dition to taking notes en masse in traditional lecture format, students meet with a scholar, known as a tutor, one-on-one, or at most in pairs, for an in-depth conversation and exchange of ideas based on a particular reading or writing assignment.

It fell to Wright to coordinate the program—everything from meals and housing to tutors and curriculum. A friend of Gillon put her in touch with a senior fellow at Brasenose, one of 39 Oxford colleges nestled throughout the city, whose name is synonymous with academic excellence.

Founded in 1509, and located within easy walking distance of shops and libraries alike, Brasenose was a perfect fit for OU’s “Honors at Oxford.” Of the 21 students who enrolled in the program that first year, five are now medical doctors, one a Fulbright Scholar and another, a Rhodes Scholar. This year, a record-breaking 66 OU students made the geographic and intellectual leap across the pond.

This summer class offerings were “The Postmodern British Novel,” “Shakespeare and Film,” “Law, Justice and Mercy” and

“Oxford and Archaeology.” The first two, worth six credit hours, included three weeks of study on the Norman campus followed by three weeks of Oxford tutorials.

“The kids in the six-hour class get to experience a whole different kind of teaching and learning,” explains Wright. “The one-on-one might be intimidating to some, but it will open their eyes. For a few, it will even light a spark.”

For the average 19-year-old, finding oneself alone in a room discussing, say, Yeats with an Oxford tutor in “a dialogue of self and soul” can be a character-building experience. Even Holly Roe, an articulate and accomplished junior majoring in letters, was left somewhat breathless by her first tutorial with Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, a fellow at Oxford’s Magdalen College.

The bare minimum for Douglas-Fairhurst’s students, who began their coursework with Wright stateside, included four post-modern novels—*Chatterton*, *Flaubert’s Parrot*, *Remains of the Day* and *Time’s Arrow*. However, the scholar of



Victorian literature and book critic for *The Observer* and *Daily Telegraph* was well-equipped to suggest supplemental texts to aid students in their exploration of post-modernism, from the authors' approach to narrative structure to the concept of time. After her second meeting with the tutor, Roe found a new voice beginning to emerge.

"I believe that I am starting to look at things on a much deeper level," Roe said in an e-mail from Oxford. "I am happy to report that I did much better on my second paper, and the conversation ran a lot more smoothly. It is a bit stressful to write a paper in the midst of trying to take in every second of Oxford/England, but I believe I have gained a lot more confidence in my abilities, and that is definitely helping."

Duncan Wu, a tutor and author of several critical volumes on Romanticism and Renaissance poetry, says, "How well you do at Oxford is dependent on how well you are able to think for yourself. It's a process of intellectual development. Most OU students are very adventurous, very positive, and they take to it readily. It's a different way of thinking. They begin to question their own assumptions. Who knows where that will lead? They might come back to Oxford."

Many do. OU students Jason Sanders and Andrea DenHoed attended Oxford for the first time with the Honors Program and returned as Rhodes Scholars. (See *Sooner Magazine*, Spring 2008.) Robert H. Henry, Chief Judge of the U.S. Court

ABOVE: A proliferation of bright blooms adorns the walkways and flower boxes of Brasenose. Here, fuschia welcomes visitors to living quarters in Old Quad.

AT LEFT: Jerry Greer, Bijon Azimi and Connie Lam work on a writing assignment in Christine Finn's archaeology class.

of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit and an OU alumnus, began teaching OU law students at Oxford and now co-teaches “Law, Justice and Mercy” in the Honors Program with veteran OU English professor Alan Velie.

Henry and Velie help students navigate the moral dilemmas set forth in literature from Shakespeare to the Bible. Although terms like “structuralism” and “hermeneutics” are introduced, the heart of the class beats in the dialogue among students and scholars.

“In this class, I want students to explore the ‘why’ of literature,” says Velie. “It’s not just reading and regurgitating. It’s a mental exercise—learning how to solve problems.”

Notes advertising major Allison Knight, “It’s very discussion intensive, rather than lecture intensive. Both professors seem to value experience over passive listening, so we’ve done a lot of Socratic dialogues . . . The mock trial provided a great way for us to see justice in action as we debated the innocence of the judge Jephthah from Judges 11 in the Bible.”

For that exercise the class divided into teams of lawyers for the defense or prosecution of the Old Testament judge. Students were allowed to use any entities mentioned in the text as witnesses, which included some big names on the justice and mercy circuit.

“I got to play God,” recalls Liz Stevens, environmental engineering sophomore, “and if I do say so myself, God was the key witness for the prosecution. My team won the trial, so Jephthah was found guilty.”

In addition to class exercises, students are treated to special guest lecturers arranged by Judge Henry. During Week One, many students had their first brush with a baroness when they met human rights activist Emma Nicholson.

A life member of the House of Lords and a member of the European Parliament for South East England, Nicholson, the Baroness of Winterbourne, serves as



vice president of the EP Committee on Foreign Affairs, promoting human rights around the globe. In 2005, together with author JK Rowling, she established the Children’s High Level Group to improve the welfare of at-risk children across Europe. On the day of her Oxford visit, the Baroness had recently returned from Iraq, where she had motored outside the protected Green Zone to see for herself the conditions of the average Iraqi citizen. After her talk, she mingled with OU stu-

dents, responding to questions and photo requests with equal diplomacy.

Featured guests for the following weeks included Richard Shepherd, a conservative member of Parliament, and concert pianist Jack Gibbons, who performed Chopin and Gershwin to a delighted audience in Brasenose Chapel.

Not all learning at OU’s summer program takes place in the classroom or even on the grounds. Christine Finn’s archaeology class utilizes field trips, supervised and not. A journalist and Oxford research associate, Finn recently published *Artifacts: An Archaeologist’s Year in Silicon Valley*, which explores the impact of high technology on American culture. She told her students personal observations were an important part of research.

“Travel will help you connect to the



Field trips add auxiliary educational opportunities to the Oxford experience. Here, OU students on a four-mile walk pause to photograph the Martyrs’ Memorial honoring three Anglican bishops who were burned at the stake during the reign of Queen Mary.



Oxford University is comprised of 39 different colleges, each with its own distinct personality. Above, a walkway by Merton College beckons visitors away from the hectic pace of a rigid academic life and into the tranquil parklike setting of Christ Church Meadow. Bordered by two rivers, the Isis and Cherwell, the Meadow offers classic recreation from punting to cricket.



Emma Nicholson, Baroness of Winterbourne and human rights activist, takes a question from a student following her talk to the OU Honors group. Later, students visited with the Baroness in an informal outdoor reception on the Oxford grounds.

world in a different way," she said. "When you're on a bus or a train, you will be working whether you realize it or not, just by your observations of the world around you."

OU chemical engineering major Jerry Greer says he likes Finn's approach to teaching, which has included trips to Stonehenge, Avebury and Uffington. "She really focuses on experiences rather than assigning long papers that will keep us cooped up in our rooms," says Greer. "She challenges us to take pictures of our travels, as well as to look at our findings from different perspectives. It was a really cool experience taking field trips with Dr. Finn because she is so passionate and knowledgeable."

Like Finn, Velie believes in the merits of a good field trip. One that has become legendary to the Honors group is the four-mile walk to The Trout, a 17th-century inn and pub in Lower Wolvercote along the Thames.

The trip begins in the heart of Oxford, past the Martyrs' Memorial, which honors three Anglican bishops who were



Gilt-framed portraits of past fellows adorn the walls of the Brasenose dining hall. The hall became the touchstone of daily life at Oxford, where students found each other to discuss upcoming assignments or weekend travel plans.

burned at the stake in the 1550s, and continues to The Eagle and Child, a local watering hole where literature professors J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis hammered out the finer points of Middle Earth and Narnia. Passing the Oxford Natural History Museum, Velie cannot help announcing, “Our dinosaur is bigger than their dinosaur,” referring to the world’s largest known *Apatosaurus* at the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History.

When cobblestones give way to footpath, Velie points out a crumbling nunery, abandoned and ransacked in the 16th century after Henry VIII broke with the Roman Catholic Church. The trail proceeds through the lovely Port Meadow, where writer Lewis Carroll picnicked in the early 1800s with a precocious little girl named Alice.

Soon Velie references another spot on the Thames, or the Isis, as it is known only around Oxford, where author and philosopher Iris Murdoch was rumored to have taken her lovers swimming without the benefit of apparel. Several cows and swans and footbridges later, the group arrives at The Trout, a dreamlike oasis of English hospitality.

“Wow,” one student exclaims, “they have buildings older than our state.”

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Stepping back in time is part of the magic of Oxford. During the summer program students live in what can best be described as a castle befitting Hogwarts. Filmmakers must have thought so, too, because many scenes from the Harry Potter movies were filmed there.

The Brasenose dining hall gleams with polished wood paneling punctuated by the gilt-framed portraits of founders and past fellows. Although the food does not appear by invisible hands, it is almost magical in terms of quality and quantity. At breakfast—along with scrambled eggs, sausages and toast—are chocolate croissants and tea; for lunch, platters of roast beef, smoked salmon and ham, along

with fresh fruit and vegetarian offerings. At dinner young men in starched white shirts serve a four-course meal that always includes a dessert meant to replenish any caloric deficit created by the afternoon walk.

Between classes, students are free to roam the bookstores and bakeries that surround Brasenose, scour the Covered Market for bargains and Ben’s Cookies, or check out the trendy shops in the more bohemian Jericho district to the north. On long weekends—classes end each week on Thursday—students take advantage of their close proximity to destinations from Dublin to Dresden. On Monday evening, conversations in the dining hall center around weekend travel as much as upcoming assignments.

“This is my 11th year here,” says Wright. “It doesn’t get old because you see it through the students’ eyes each time. There is something about this place. It doesn’t look like anyplace in the U.S. The students tend to feel smarter as soon as they pass through the gates.”

Megan Vance, a junior majoring in math, says she wanted to attend Oxford, and it became affordable at OU through her standing as a National Merit Scholar. Of the course work she notes, “It’s challenging, but worth it.”

Kyle Harper participated in the Honors Program before his senior year in 2000, taking a course on the poetry of Yeats and T. S. Eliot. After graduating a year ahead of schedule, he earned his master’s and Ph.D. in history at Harvard. He returned to OU last year as assistant professor in Classics and Letters.

“My summer at Oxford with the Honors Program was one of the best academic experiences I had,” Harper recalls. “It’s a unique chance to be exposed to the Oxford educational system in the truest sense. Having someone so knowledgeable in their field reading your work and wanting to talk to you about it every week is invaluable. You get into a rhythm and start to develop your own skills and critical thinking and writing ability very quickly.

“In the end, it’s not just the poetry you take away, it’s the process.”

Lynette Lobban is associate editor of Sooner Magazine.