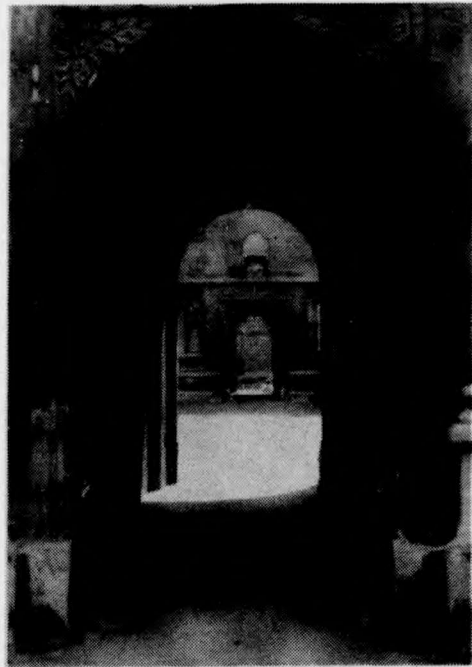


"But all the time it seemed to me that there was a quintessential Oxford which I knew and loved from afar and intended to find."
A Little Learning, Evelyn Waugh



Students from around the world pass through the venerable archways of Oxford each summer, both to study and to savour its authentic culture first-hand. *Excalibur's* John Wen, an economics major and pub enthusiast, spend last summer in Exeter College and returns with this vivid travelogue.



Oncealed within its quadrangles, halls, and tumescent archways, Oxford has a way of transporting the mind and body into a wholly alien world of learning, culture, and history. With most of the undergraduate population absent for the summer holidays, foreign summer students are left to recreate student life amidst the mass of tourists. In an obvious but astute way to increase revenue during this season, the majority of colleges, in association with American universities, provide an opportunity for foreign students to study at Oxford.

The one exceptional programme is the International Graduate Summer School (IGSS), which is administered by the External Studies Department of the University of Oxford. The IGSS programme is held each summer at Exeter College and dates back to the late 1940s. Students visit from 19 different nations, including France, Bulgaria, Japan, Nigeria, Korea, Saudi Arabia, India, and Brazil. A veritable cosmopolitan atmosphere was created by the people of all ages and many nations (although mainly American).

Upon arrival at Exeter College my eyes were open with anticipation and nervousness. The college porter greeted me then

The Quintessential Oxford

showed me my room. Other students were arriving at about the same time, most looking weary, victims of jet-lag. I suggest that the student arrive a day or two ahead to help ease recovery from the exhausting trip and to familiarize him/herself with English customs. A week in London prior to classes is even preferable as an exercise in toughening up. There you quickly learn to watch out for cars driving at mad speeds on the left side of the road and how to deal in English currency. My near-death on Knightsbridge Road by the steering of an old lady driver soon convinced me that looking both ways *continuously* while crossing would probably prolong my life.

Never having lived in residence at York I was about to enter the obscure world of campus life. My room was located on the ground floor in staircase 11, with windows looking out onto busy Broad Street. Certainly not a room with a view. However, it was a spacious residence with a comfortable bed, a coffee table, a desk and chair. Arranged around the small table were three rather large sofa-chairs. Some book shelves, a sink, a fireplace, and a closet completed the decor. A scout (maid-servant) to make my bed and clean my room each morning (except on Sunday) was more than I could ask for.

At dinner, Mondays to Thursdays, we were all required to wear jackets and ties or skirts or dresses. I chose jackets and ties. Dinner was surprisingly wonderful, especially after my encounters with York cafeteria food. Wine washed down each dinner nicely.

The splendour of Exeter's Dining Hall, built in 1618, kept me gazing at the remarkable rare Spanish elm ceiling and the wood screen over the entrance, while the scouts brought us our dinner. The Rector of the college, Lord Crowther-Hunt, presided over most of the formal dinners, opening with a loud rap on a wooden block and the prayer "Benedictit, benedictat." The most memorable and enjoyable custom of college meals was the way one had to leave the table if trapped in the middle of a long bench against the wall. You could wait until everyone to sides left or more adventurously, step onto your seat, walk over the table and onto the opposite bench. For those familiar with the movie *Oxford Blues*, you may remember a similar scene.

A rather prim and proper woman who complained endlessly about everything she ate, was horrified by this ancient custom. I

decided to seat myself as close as possible to her, whenever possible, and walk over the table. My fun was soon put to an end when she learned to sit at the end of the long tables or at the middle table.

I should, however, caution students never to wear slippery leather-soled shoes when attempting this. One morning at breakfast in a semi-conscious, torpid state, I climbed over the table and just as I set my food on the polished stone floor, my legs flew out and down I came in a loud crash. I lay on the cold ground for a moment, my legs poised in the air, pondering on whether I should wait for someone to help me up or get up and walk out, saving what little dignity I had left. I chose the latter.

The college food was commendable until the last two weeks when suspiciously familiar food started to turn up at frequent intervals, culminating in the serving of a fatty lamb chop swimming in a nameless brown-grey sauce, accompanied by over-boiled carrots, broccoli, and the ever present potatoes. The alternative was a flavourless carrot flan served with the same water-logged vegetables. I remarked to a friend next to me that we had carrots last night and at luncheon earlier in the day. We pushed our plates away in disgust. Fortunately, there are plenty of good places to eat in Oxford.

Pubs serve excellent standard English fare (steak and kidney pie, bangers and mash), at very reasonable prices. I highly recommend The White Horse pub, across Broad St., next to the famous Blackwell's Bookstore. The Nag's Head is dependable for serving a filling meal. You will find it set at the end of bridge over the Mesopotamia River, affording a charming view from its windows. That night of the dreadfully offensive dinner, a group of us later dined at the Taj Mahal right across the college on Turl St. I discovered to my delight that I liked Indian food.

Lectures were held each morning, Mondays to Fridays, from 9:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. After a night out in the pubs, those hours made it seem like an ungodly hour to do anything. Yet, perhaps the most alluring feature of this summer school were the lectures. There I heard the faint voice of an ill Richard Ellman enter the cathedral-like silence of a lecture hall, discoursing on "The Life of Oscar Wilde at Oxford."

Lord Crowther-Hunt's revealing look at the "Power of the Civil Service," drawing on his many years of experience in the

PHOTOS BY JOHN WEN

