

PERM NEWS

The newsletter of the Perm Association

January 2007

The Russian economy and climate change – a view from the front line

Ah – the Trans-Siberian Railway – with its romantic great-train-journey image of a distant thread of carriage lights and glowing engine pushing on remorselessly across the dark and lonely vastness of Siberia carrying a cast of Pasternak characters, cold war spies and wide-eyed (*well at least for the first 4 hours*) wanderlust tourists. Actually it's a clattering commercial artery that, along with its quieter oil and gas pipeline cousins, is carrying the mineral wealth out of Siberia and across to Western Europe where it's sold to fund a bright new Russian future. As you head steadily eastwards you pass train after train coming the other way hauling huge cylindrical oil drums and open wagons of coal and timber. Sever it and you'd kill the Russian economy in a matter of days.

As the climate change officer for one of the London boroughs, I watch this with a mixture of professional fascination and personal disquiet. Siberia is going to be one of the great battlegrounds in the fight against global warming over the next 50 years. It has the grimly ironic privilege of potentially tipping us over into runaway global warming by having its tundra thaw out and in so doing releasing millions of tonnes of highly potent methane greenhouse gas into the atmosphere - as well as providing much of the fossil fuel that might ultimately be responsible for the CO₂ damage.



But of course it's this fossil fuel which is driving the Russian economy. It's wonderful that Russians are going to be able to join us in the comfortable and secure Developed World club with our cars, consumer goods and insurance premiums, but what's this going to mean for the environment? Even the most confident climatologists say that by 2050 we absolutely have to stabilize carbon dioxide emissions at 550 parts per million (550 molecules of CO₂ for every million molecules of atmosphere).

So I wanted to find out if what Al Gore refers to as the "inconvenient truth" had intruded into the consciousness of Permians yet. To be honest I rather arrogantly assumed that I would find

widespread ignorance among my unsophisticated Russian cousins, and it was the deflation of this Western European anthropological mindset that was the most satisfying and enlightening aspect of my visit.

While there is clearly not such a general understanding about climate change as there is here in the UK, there is certainly a similar emotional pulse just beneath the surface. Even uttering the words “climate change” evoked an instant response, and I ended up interviewed by local TV, radio and newspapers. Among Permians there was a slight sense of embarrassment that their country wasn't doing enough, but they felt that *doing something* was out of their hands – that they are detached from decision-making – that this is all carried out far away in Moscow by faceless people. A common explanation was that although communism has officially gone, the “them” and “us” communist mindset endures throughout society. That having been said, when I actually met some of the non-political establishment I was surprised by the level of concern about climate change and the expectation that citizens should be consulted about things. Perm has a sophisticated town planning department, and the new Plan for the city takes account of all the same pollution, transport, and quality of life issues that we do here. I met the head of the department, Tatiana Samolienska, and the Head of Development Control, Tatiana Gudz, who was at that very moment dealing with exactly what I was doing at home in London – trying to work out how to provide hot water and electricity to a couple of new high-rise apartment blocks.

The following day I met people from the Russian Federation's Ecological, Technological and Nuclear Regulatory Authority to talk about implementing the Kyoto protocol – and this was a surprise. Kyoto is about countries trading carbon credits. Each country is allowed to emit so much CO₂, and if you exceed that limit then you have to buy some CO₂ credits from a country that is below its allowance. Now it so happens that at the moment Russia is in credit whilst Germany is in debit. The way that this works is not as simple as the German Government writing out a cheque to the Russian - it's far more subtle. The Perm City Administration twins a local business with a counterpart in Germany; in this case Perm's aging and dreadfully un-environmental paper mill is twinned with a plastics factory outside Frankfurt. Rather than the plastics factory paying its eco-taxes to the Bundesbank, they instead pay for the environmental improvements to the Perm paper mill. The EcoTechNuke people oversee and validate the process.

By the second week my schoolboyish excitement for big machines began to take hold, and when my hosts kindly offered to take me on a sightseeing tour of their lovely old town centre, I pleaded to be driven south towards the power station and oil refineries – the direction from which that strange smell comes that pervades Perm. As you leave the suburbs you begin to notice these pipes snaking across the countryside, carrying hot water from the power station to heat the city. They track along by the side of the highway, suddenly rearing up over side roads in order to let vehicles underneath, because of course you can't bury them as the ground freezes solid in winter. The further we went the wider the pipes became and as we cleared the brow of a hill we were confronted by a magnificent coal oil hybrid power station circa 1957, smoke and tonnes of CO₂ pouring from the chimneys, steam billowing from the cooling towers and wheezing from vents and heat distribution pipes. As a power station it is a truly awesome climate change nightmare, but the district heating network is actually by far the most efficient way to heat a town, and is exactly what we in the UK are starting to investigate now – so Russia has the right idea, but its infrastructure is just too old for it to be carbon efficient.

And so to the next generation - I had the chance to ask several groups of students whether climate change meant anything to them. Many, besides being properly absorbed in their mobile phones, have a keen sense of politics, society and their existence in the global arena. They understand that Russia must deal with this issue, it's just that to do so may well compromise their economic growth, and it's simply unfair to expect them to take the lead while the USA ignores the problem. And they have a point. Where does this Russian awareness of climate change come from? Some said they picked it up from the media or friends and some seem to have observed changes in the climate. As a nation of dacha owners, maybe they're more sensitive to these changes than us, though the fact the temperature fluctuated wildly from +25c down to -2c and back to +25c in the two weeks I was there might have something to do with it. Permians are joining the rest of us as global awareness rises exponentially. We are all learning that climate change really does threaten our human civilization.

Adrian Hewitt

Non - profit partnership “Perm – Oxford” - two years of activities

Two years ago the Christmas meeting of Perm-Oxford Link activists decided to found a non-profit organization with its mission to advance Russian and British friendship and cultural understanding by developing lasting relations between our twin cities Perm and Oxford. A year ago the organization was registered as the Non-Profit Partnership “Perm - Oxford”.

What does the “Perm – Oxford” organization offer to the people of Perm? It can give Permians the chance to make contact with people in Oxford either individually or as a group. It opens up a wider world of opportunity for them too: they can pursue a professional or cultural interest, share a hobby or a sport, learn or practise a foreign language, support a development project, build business or other special interest contacts.

Our members have a chance to develop a successful partnership in the various programmes:

Arts and Culture, Community Initiatives, Disability Advocacy and Awareness, Education, Youth Involvement, Environment, Healthcare, Women in Leadership and Sports.

The organization is governed by the Committee, consisting of seven people. There are 30 members at the present time. The leaders of many active Perm NGOs and municipal organizations have become our members. So it's necessary to say that we have formed a sort of Perm - Oxford Coalition

of organizations: The House of Friendship, the Hospice, the Anti-drug programmes, The Committee of Former Teachers, the fund “Zashchita”, The Society of Disabled People, The Centre for Family Support, The Regional Centre of International projects, as well as the House of Teachers, the Municipal Social Centre and a school. There are some students of the Medical Academy and the Technical University among the members. The Non-Profit Partnership “Perm - Oxford” has united many different organizations and hopes to attract more enthusiasts to its activities.

In December 2006 we produced placards about our joint activities with the Perm Association in Oxford and set up 'Twin Cities' stands at meetings of various Perm organizations. The first Newsletter was issued in October, 2006. That very month the Committee of the organization was introduced to the Consul General of the UK, Kevin Lynch.

The previous December we had an entertaining Christmas Party where we spoke about Oxford and Oxford people, and included a special Oxford quiz. Our guests at the party were the Ensemble of Scottish Dance who taught us to dance. We wish there was someone from Oxford at the moment. It's necessary to say that we are glad to see people from Oxford anytime. They are always welcome.

Galina Gusarova

Note:

Galina works for Perm city administration where she is responsible for contacts with charitable and social work groups. The Perm Association in Oxford has contributed grants to several of these organizations including the Hospice, the Society for Disabled People, 'Zashchita' and the Centre for Family Support. Galina's members would like to hear from any of you who have visited Perm – or hope to do so in the future. Please contact <karen.hewitt@conted.ox.ac.uk> if you would like to do so.

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Putin through the eyes of ordinary Russians

Vladimir Putin became Acting President of Russia on 1st January 2000, and was elected as President three months later. The Russian constitution allows him two four-year terms, so he will be coming to the end of his presidency in a year's time.

In the British media he gets a mixed press; he's clearly organised and competent, but the popular picture is of a crafty enigmatic man who has a bad record on Chechnya and unnerving powers over energy supplies to the West. Do we trust Putin? ask the journalists, as though it was his job to make himself trustworthy to 'the British' or 'the West'. Perhaps it is more pertinent to find out how Russians view their President after seven years. We tend, after all, to believe in our own assessment of Blair (whatever that is) than some account by *The Washington Post* or the Russian daily *Izvestia*

I circulated eighty-four Russians who took part in a seminar in Perm last September. They are all teachers of English and English literature, which suggests a similarity of outlook, but they come from more than 40 Russian cities. I asked them their opinions about Putin from their perspective as ordinary Russian citizens. The 21 answers I have so far received follow quite closely the range of opinions regularly reported in the Russian press.

'He is the first well-educated man, who can speak foreign languages, has a sense of humour and can speak without notes. The first president who is not like a doll ridiculed by people.'

Russians respect education, particularly the ability to speak other languages and behave like a cultured person. Everybody knows that a senior KGB officer earned the equivalent of a Sandhurst-plus-prestigious-university degree. Putin is intelligent and he knows how to use that education on the national and international stage. (How many of our Prime Ministers are fluent in another language and ready to express themselves in a couple more?) You may be surprised to hear that he has a sense of humour, but Russians enjoy his dry ironical observations on tricky situations – an irony which he invites them to share as fellow-Russians.

To be continued in a future newsletter:

What Putin has done wrong; Putin and international affairs; what matters to Russians.

'Before his coming to power the country was immensely humiliated by President Yeltsin who became a laughing stock in the eyes of foreigners and his compatriots due to his behaviour.'

This is another theme: Russians emerged from the end of the Soviet Union emotionally battered, financially and socially ruined and certain that they were being mocked by the rest of the civilized world. They had lost one country, and the new one was represented by a man who seemed to be no longer a hero but a drunken buffoon. So their prevailing feeling is gratitude for the contrast that Putin's leadership has brought.

'He brought hope, self-respect and stability back after Yeltsin's rule, that is why he is popular with the majority of the population. His two daughters study in Russia, which is a positive sign.'

Stability: when my respondents (and other Russians) explain their respect for Putin it is, first and foremost, in terms of 'stability'.

'He managed to stabilize our life and even to improve it (though unfortunately not in all areas).'

They agree that increasing Russian prosperity over the last few years has been chiefly due to Russian oil and gas, and the high world prices for energy, but they insist that – by and large – that money has not gone to crazy oligarchs, as in Yeltsin's reign, but into the state coffers, and then out again for the benefit of the people. Under other leaders such sudden wealth might have led to anarchic greed and the collapse, again, of social order. Putin has ensured calm and steady control. He has not done enough to solve corruption and failures at local level, but he is *trying* to do so.

'He is attentive to other peoples' needs, which is very hard when one takes such a post. That doesn't mean he helps everyone but he cares not only about global projects but also about real peoples' needs. That is very natural for the European countries but for Russia it was he who started such a tendency.'

Karen Hewitt

Dates for your diary

Extended programme

The committee is endeavouring to offer members an extended programme of events in 2007. Where no date is given, the date, time and venue will be published in future newsletters.

January onwards – film nights

Film nights are being revived from January 2007, when the Magdalen College cinema became available again. All films are shown at 7.30pm, and the programme for this term is available on <http://www.magdalenfilmsociety.com/termcard.shtml> Members are invited to request Russian films by contacting any member of the committee.

January onwards - St Antony's College seminars

St Antony's College (62 Woodstock Rd) offers programmes of lectures and seminars - one on Post-Soviet Russia on Mondays at 5.00pm, from January, in the Nissan Lecture Theatre; and one on "Them and Us: The Other in the Russian Imagination" on Fridays, from 16 February, at 5.00pm, mostly in the Dahrendorf Room. Details are on their web site at www.sant.ox.ac.uk

February - Victorian Evening

On Friday 16 February there will be a Victorian Evening at 7.00pm in the Assembly Room at Oxford Town Hall. Come and enjoy a Victorian Music Hall – supper included. Victorian dress optional. Tickets at £10 (£8 concessions) from May Wylie, tel. 01865 252537.

URGENT – we need a few volunteers to help to clear up after the event. If willing to help, please contact Ann Davis on 01993 811927

February - Annual General Meeting

The AGM of the Perm Association will be held at 6.00pm on Wednesday 21 February 2007 at Wolfson College. The Chairman and Secretary have announced their intention to stand down from their posts. Nominations are invited for these and other offices. The business meeting will be followed by a talk by Peter Oppenheimer, a well-known expert on Russian affairs and Russian humour.

March – Art Exhibition by Artists from Perm

Art works by art students from Perm will be on display from 1 to 9 March. Venue details in due course from May Wylie.

May – Russians' Views on Putin

Karen Hewitt will give us a talk, detailing the responses by Russian academics to a recent survey of their views about Putin's Russia.

June – Social Event

Details to follow.

August - Carmina Burana

There will be a multi-national performance of Carmina Burana in Oxford on 31 August and 1 September, and in Bonn on 27 October. This will involve singers, instrumentalists and dancers from Perm, Leiden, Oxford and Bonn.

September – University Exchange

The annual exchange visit to Perm will take place from 8 to 23 September 2007. All are warmly invited to apply – you do not need to be a member of the university! Details from Karen Hewitt.

October – "Palmyra of the North"

An illustrated talk by Richard Sills on the building of St Petersburg in the 18th century.

November - University Exchange

We welcome teachers from Perm on the return leg of the university exchange. There will be a party to welcome them, and members are welcome to invite them out in the evening or at weekends.

Yarmarka, Christmas Parade and International Christmas Fair

At the end of November we once again had the pleasure of seeing and hearing this extraordinary group from Perm. The dancers, singers and players gave many performances to enthusiastic crowds during the week long visit. One of the first was in the old castle complex following the town parade. Unfortunately it was late afternoon and the performers were asked to perform in a rather dark area which made it difficult to appreciate to the full the wonderful coloured costumes.

During their stay they had mini tours in and around the city (all organised by May Wylie who seems to have boundless energy). One day I was fortunate enough to see them perform in a primary school in Carterton which was much appreciated by the children in two different age groups both of whom applauded enthusiastically. Then we moved on to Standlake village hall which was packed as it was three years ago and where the group received a warm reception for each act. How the dancers can perform several times in one day is hard to fathom, but they never seem to tire.

One of their final public performances was at the Town Hall. This was an ideal venue with a large floor space so the performers could exhibit all their talents to the full in this more formal presentation. It was a truly spectacular event with many changes of coloured costumes and different styles of music. This was followed by a reception for Perm Association members at which we had a chance to converse (language barriers permitting) with the performers. Not only was it a real pleasure to watch and listen to this group again, but to renew old friendships and develop new ones was one of the very satisfying parts of the twinning experience.

David Roulston

Russian classes

OU DCE is offering Russian classes at Ewert House. The Stage 1 course, run by Ludmilla Checkley on Wednesdays from 7.00 to 9.00pm, restarted on 10 January; and Russian Lower Intermediate Conversation, run by Kira on Tuesdays from 4.00 to 5.30pm, restarted on 9 January. They hope to have a Stage 2 class in the autumn as well.

Cheap flights

German Wings offers flights from London to Moscow via Cologne, from as little as £150.

Oxford International Links News

OIL

All the link organisations helped to organise a multinational Christmas Fair in the Castle area, raising over £600 for OIL funds.

Bonn

The Anglo-German Club visited Bonn in December.

A group from Bonn will visit Oxford from 17 to 21 May 2007, to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the link and attend the unveiling of a commemorative stained glass window.

Plans are being made for jubilee celebrations in Bonn in October 2007.

Grenoble

The revived Oxford Grenoble Association has a new logo, shared with its partner organisation in Grenoble. Folk groups from Grenoble will take part in the Oxford Folk Festival on 30 & 31 March. A final concert featuring the Grenoble folk groups will take place on Sunday 1 April. Tickets from Mel Houldershaw, tel. 07966 01556

Leiden

A group from Leiden visited Oxford for the annual Remembrance Day commemoration in November. The K & G band from Leiden took part in the Christmas parade in the city centre on 25 November

Leon

The Oxford Leon Trust has donated over £6800 to the Nicaragua Education, Culture and Arts Trust, to fund specific projects.

Perm in a (mild) winter (and a couple of caveats)

Opinion was divided. Some muttered darkly about global warming, others said it was just a natural aberration of the climate; some thought it was a joke, others saw it as a warning for the future. Whatever the truth of the matter, there can be no doubt that our apprehensions about facing a Russian winter for the first time in our lives proved to be unfounded. The lowest temperature we experienced was about minus seven and for the last two or three days of our 10-day visit to Perm in January the reading was actually above freezing. The ice statues in the squares were starting to melt and had to be roped off in case they collapsed on to unsuspecting passers-by, the snow in the streets was turning to slush, and gloves became just an unnecessary encumbrance.

Be that as it may, the first few days were reasonably cold with plenty of snow and we managed to get our Dr Zhivago-style ride on a horse-drawn sleigh with bells and baubles. This was a magical day. Our hosts had hired a warm log cabin at the end of the stable, with all the comforts one could ask for and with copious supplies of food, vodka and wine (which is fast gaining in popularity). We were even able to risk several white-knuckled descents down a huge slide outside, made entirely from ice. The barbecue was accomplished in the snow, a commonplace practice in Russia (how about that, you Aussie softies?) I don't know what it all cost but our attempts to make a contribution were laughed off.

Misha and Ira had meticulously prepared our 10-day programme, including a visit to the Perm opera and a very interesting and enjoyable production of 'Dr Zhivago - the musical'. Neither performance was without flaws but both showed a high overall standard. The opera was Massenet's Cinderella and it was noticeable that the ugly sisters were both considerably better-looking and younger than Cinderella herself. But that is in the nature of opera and we have seen similar contradictions at Covent Garden. Unfortunately Cinderella did not help her credibility in the first act by allowing her wig to slip, thereby exposing her own hair-line! Dr Zhivago was memorable. The music, although unfamiliar, was really good and I kept getting resonances of Les Misérables,

which we saw on the London stage some years ago. There were one or two dodgy singers in the supporting cast, but that is easily forgiven.

At the weekend we had the opportunity to see Russia at play on a winter Sunday afternoon. We went to some wooded slopes in a Perm suburb where there were sledges, skiers, toboggans and snowballs flying in all directions and, of course, the ubiquitous family barbecues in the snow. Everything was very good-natured and even the numerous collisions did not seem to generate any aggravations.

Now for the bad bits. Apart from the English head-cold which we innocently took with us in incubation and which is presumably still ravaging its way around Perm, there were two downers. First, Aeroflot, having very comfortably and punctually got us to Perm, managed to leave our baggage in Moscow. Misha, I am glad to say, made this problem his own and bludgeoned, cajoled and sweet-talked his way into getting it all back - eventually. Aeroflot's excuse was that we had not completed a customs declaration. My counter to this was that we had been told by the Aeroflot check-in clerk at Heathrow that there was now a new system in place and the baggage would go straight through to Perm without our having to do anything. Furthermore, I told the check-in clerk for the internal flight from Moscow to Perm that I was not sure I believed this. 'You can believe it' was her reply. On our return we insisted that we would pick our baggage up from the carousel in Moscow and personally take it to Terminal 2 and check it in for the London flight ourselves. Future travellers be warned!

The second problem concerned our visas. Because this was a private visit to stay with individual Russian citizens (i.e. not at the invitation of the University) we were required to have our visas validated at the local OVIR office in Perm. Again, Misha was the hero and did everything. First we were told that each visitor needed to pay one rouble per day for the whole of our stay. For Frances and me this amounted to about 40 pence but the problem was that OVIR could not accept it and we needed to go to a bank, pay our 40p and get a stamp on our immigration

forms to prove the point! Then there was considerable confusion over which OVIR office we needed to go to. At the first one at the rear of the Central Market, Misha had to persuade an official to let us fight our way through a large gaggle of Uzbeks, Tadzhiks and Azerbaidjanis in order to get in, only to be told that we were at the wrong office. When we eventually found the right office, it took about an hour of waiting, form-filling and wondering before we finally got our stamps. Apparently, this procedure is not necessary for anyone staying in a hotel so I am told that the best way for private visitors is to bribe a hotel to stamp your visa! Future travellers be

warned - again!

These problems were exacerbated by the fact that it was holiday time and nobody wanted to do much (not exclusively a Russian snag) but, although I speak Russian, I doubt that I could have coped without Uncle Misha.

So, there's both the good and the bad. Overall, an experience not to be missed and you can dine out on it for months afterwards.

Ken Cugnoni

Perm developing - an eight-year stretch

Nine years ago Ken and I attended a WEA all-day lecture in Marlow about the current political and economic state of Russia. It included lunch and a comprehensive slide show and was delivered by a lady called Karen Hewitt. We went because we were thinking of doing one of the two-week river/canal trips from Moscow to St Petersburg and we wanted a bit of background. However, what we got was a life-changing experience. At the end of the slide show there were some pictures of Perm, a city whose university had become twinned with Oxford's. Karen invited anyone interested in going on an exchange visit to leave names and addresses with her. I tore a corner off a newspaper and gave her our details. We had almost forgotten this but about four months later our form for the Perm visit arrived from Karen. We did not hesitate and completed the form. Ken was enthusiastic. For many years he had been prevented from visiting the potential enemy country by reason of his employment. He spoke the language but, until recently, it had seemed impossible that he would ever go there. We started to find out about Perm, initially by looking on the internet. It was a city the size of Birmingham; yet hardly anybody in England had ever heard of it. It had been a closed city under Communism - a place of heavy industry where they made aero engines, Katyusha rockets and who knows what else? I then started to wonder - was this a place we would actually like to visit? As the time for our visit grew nearer,

intimidated rather than intrepid, I became more and more silent and apprehensive.

Should we have been worried? Well, in some ways, yes. One of my worries was fear of Russian lavatories - which proved to be gruesomely well-founded! However, the train trip from Moscow was a delight. Our group members were great companions and we soon found that so were some of the Russian travellers, with whom we shared vodka, sausages, ice cream and caviar. Slava, our minder, warned darkly against this fraternisation but no harm came of it. The perception of Russians as friends was confirmed when we were met by our family. We were plunged into warm baths, fed and welcomed as family members.

Next day our impressions of Perm began to be formed; civilised refinements were not much in evidence, the only place which remotely resembled a shop was TSUM (the other retail establishments were mostly dark and forbidding) and supermarkets did not exist. Even loo rolls were hard to find and there was great competition for bath plugs (corks were sometimes used instead). The roads and pavements were hazardous, confirming us in our decision to bring sturdy boots. We met a lady at the university who had lived in an old wooden house which had been compulsorily purchased and replaced by blocks of flats, one of which we were staying in! She had remarkable resilience, as evidenced by her trip to her vegetable patch,

which involved either a one-and-a-half hour train journey followed by a six-kilometre walk over sticky mud or a five-hour boat trip. She usually chose the former because the boat was expensive at 40 roubles (£1). She carried all her gardening equipment and produce.

We discovered that Russians at play were like anyone else, although rather more resourceful than most. They could produce a magnificent barbecue in any weather - and often did! The performances of the opera and ballet companies were of a very high standard and were unbelievably inexpensive.

Since then we have been to Perm a further three times. By the second trip we were already beginning to notice differences. TSUM no longer had a monopoly of decent lavatories, the Ural hotel had a cash machine and roads were improving. By the time of our third trip more sinister changes were creeping in; many of the lovely old wooden houses (albeit some of them in a decrepit condition) were being replaced by modern concrete.

Some of the flats appearing were for 'New Russians' (pronounced in English with a curl of the lip). Nonetheless, our family was very proud of the splendid new road outside the window. Our fourth visit, privately arranged this winter, evidenced even more developments. Everything is much more civilised and comfortable, although there are still vestiges of the grim old Soviet bureaucracy. Loo rolls and bath plugs are ten-a-rouble now and there are restaurants which actually appear to want your custom.

We have a friend who is thinking of going on the next exchange visit in September. She will find much to interest her, it won't be as Spartan as in days of old, but there will still be adventures to be had. It won't be a luxury holiday but certainly one she will always remember and treasure, even if she never goes back. We have always found Perm difficult to resist. That's why we keep returning.

Frances Cugnoni

Note from Membership Secretary

Membership subscriptions for 2007 were due on 1st January. If you do not pay by bank Standing Order and have not already paid, would you please send your cheque for £8 per member to:

Membership Secretary, Perm Association,
6 Heath Lane,
Bladon,
Oxon.
OX20 1SB

If you have a friend who is interested in joining, please let me know and I will send a leaflet containing an application form and a description of the association.

David Roulston
Tel: 01993 813 215
email: djrouls@aol.com

Spirits of the City

Old cities have always impressed me. But they do so not by the beautiful architecture, calm or roaring lifestyle, weird customs and traditions or exotic names of the street. No. The most impressive thing about old cities is that they are inconceivably eternal. I think it is because these cities are guarded by the spirits of the dead people who used to live here. However gloomy it may seem it is true. The majority of the overall population (in historic terms) does not go shopping, or meet with friends; they humbly lie in the cemetery.

Not every one of them is friendly. That is a huge contrast to the people I met and talked to in Oxford. (Let's disregard the football fans we met on Nov. 29, 2006). But the spirits of the dead who lived in the city, coped with the routine of every day, honourably or not, still seem exciting to me. The feeling is so strong that I close my eyes and see their figures wandering around the city. It is because of this feeling I do not know what to say when people ask me about my impressions of Oxford. I am usually short of words. I just say "You know the most amazing thing was warm, good weather". It is not because I have nothing to say, it is because I have too much on my mind about it and it will take more than just a couple of usual phrases. Now I will try to be more articulate. I was fascinated by the everyday life in Oxford, not the routine but the cultural, historical, geographic conditions of life. This again lacks the most essential part – what is called the spirit of the city, or the spirits of the city to be more precise.

Just a simple example to explain my point. The trip to Oxford was certainly fascinating. The stunning beauty of surroundings, architecture delightful as music, the special softness and tact in relationships between people! Everything was just so wonderful, incredible and that is why unbelievable. I actually understood that I really was in Oxford right in the middle of Christ Church Meadows. I suddenly saw, imagined, the setting in *Alice in Wonderland*. I was not hallucinating, I was just filling the form I knew all my life with a new understanding.



You know, everyone has his own key to getting to know a foreign culture. My key to Oxford and England might be Lewis Carroll who is known as one of the most outstanding spirits guarding Oxford. My knees were weak and I walked along the river, stricken by some *dejà vu* feeling. I was walking around easily as though I was just reading a book. And the reality, as it always happens with *dejà vu* was brighter, more meaningful than the premonition.

Ivan Kolpakov (translated by Irina Maizeles)

[This article is by one of the teachers from Perm University who was in Oxford in November. For those of you at the party, Ivan was the young man who played the guitar.]