



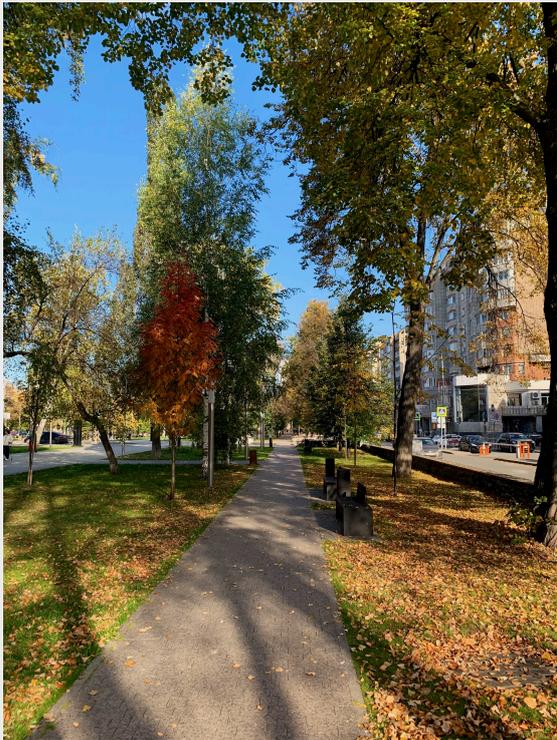
PERM NEWS

Оксфорд и Пермь

О Р А

Oxford Perm Association

Newsletter October 2025



photos: Autumn in Perm, Anatoly Melentev, OPA summer garden party in Oxford, Sergey Vlasov

Below is an edited version of Tatiana Grigorieva's letter which Karen read out at the annual OPA summer garden party in Oxford

Dear friends,

It is so nice to know that there are people in Oxford who love Perm, think about Perm and care for Perm. The friendship thread is not that thin when many hands hold it! You might want to know how Perm is today, how it breathes. Perm today is a very vibrant city, full of energy. One of the signs is that Perm has begun to host many more forums, conferences and other all-Russia and international events than before.

In May, Perm welcomed experts and politicians from more than 50 countries who came to the International Eurasian public-political hearings. The main topic of the event was the development of international economic and humanitarian cooperation of Russian regions and ensuring mutual security. Country participants included China, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Korea, Vietnam, Spain, Kyrgyzstan, India, Germany, Austria, France, etc. The hearings were chaired by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. It was Lavrov's first ever visit to Perm.

You might know that five years ago Perm was awarded the title City of Labour Valour. In 2025 Perm hosted a big forum of Cities of Labour Valour with 500 participants from 30 regions. It included exhibitions, seminars, talks devoted to heroism of people in the Rear during the Great Patriotic War: factory workers, physicians and nurses at hospitals, young people helping adults, cultural treasures forwarded and treasured in Perm. Karl Marx Square was renamed the Square of Labour Valour. And of course – there are many, many events for the young, all this year, as Perm is The Youth Capital of Russia 2025.

If at the weekend you don't go to the dacha or tour the region but stay in the city you'll never be bored: you can spend all day at the Esplanade or the evening at the renovated Embankment and watch open air concerts, master classes, sport games, interactive activities etc. As you know, the city improvements for the tercentenary two years ago made Perm look splendid. We thought it was only for the jubilee year but Perm is still as gorgeous as it was then. We're now used to all these landscape renovations, abundance of flowers and small parks and lovely small river valleys. No wonder that in 2024 Perm came 4th in Russian cities with 1 million inhabitants in the Rating of the Quality of Urban Environment. Only a couple of years ago Perm was 13th place!

Some political news: in September there are the Governor's elections (for a 5 year term). The present Governor, Dmitry Makhonin was elected in 2020 and he stands for the elections again. (note: On September 14, Dmitry Makhonin was elected the Governor of the Perm region for five years with about 71% of votes)

The theatre season was eventful too. The annual Diaghilev Fest as usual impressed us with plenty of classical and experimental performances of all forms. Perm Opera and Ballet Theatre have produced two gems – ballets Orpheus (Igor Stravinsky) and Sylvia (Leo Delibes) and a breath taking opera Samson et Dalila (Camille Saint-Saëns) .

The Oxford Perm link is a part of our lives, and it has been being maintained and preserved by you, dear friends. Let us keep this sincere and long-lasting connection!

With warmest wishes, Tatiana Grigorieva

It is widely known that Georgia and Russia have had a long-standing troubled relationship, and this was apparent during my recent visit. There is a lot of anti-Russian graffiti in English in Tbilisi. Much of it would be unprintable in this newsletter. Both the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia are currently under Russian control and are inaccessible to Georgians. This means that around 20% of ‘Georgian’ territory has been lost. There are daily protests outside the parliament building against the pro-Russian Georgian Dream party; police brutality against protesters is increasing and EU flags are flown throughout the country in protest against the policies of the current regime.



Near one of the major bridges, there is a pedestrian underpass which has been developed into a timeline of Russian aggression in Georgia, in both English and Georgian (see image). It can't really be described as graffiti as there is structure and uniformity to the layout. The first 'entry' relates to 1801, and examples continue up to the current day, with some space for further 'entries'.

As expected, there are many Russians in Georgia. Some are clearly tourists in groups like the one I was travelling with; others appeared to be residents. I was told that the older generation of Georgians are more tolerant of these political migrants from Russia. Younger people tend to resent the migrants' presence as these incomers generally keep a low profile and don't get involved in anti-Russian political activism with their Georgian peers.

Several times during the week, I needed to use Russian to communicate with Georgians (generally of an older generation): two taxi drivers; in a couple of shops; and with a curator of a provincial museum. However, a young shop assistant in the Duty Free in Tbilisi was overheard to insist: '*I will not speak Russian*' to one of her Russian customers! Our tour included a visit to the Stalin Museum in Gori where he was born. Stalin is almost certainly the most (in)famous Georgian, so presenting his legacy is clearly problematic. Large rooms on the first floor of the museum present his early life, rise to power, role in WW2, etc, but ignore the Purges. A small, easily-overlooked room on the ground floor goes some way to addressing the balance, but everyone in the group left the visit feeling rather uncomfortable. Nobody was tempted to buy a wall clock or mug bearing Stalin's image!

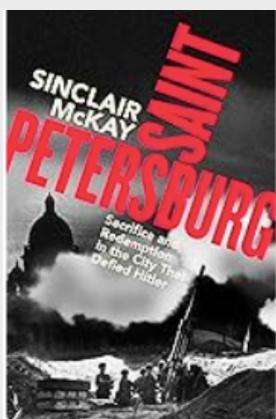
The tour also took us north along the Georgian Military Highway to Gudauri and the magnificent Mount Kazbegi, which we were fortunate enough to see in bright sunshine. I was astonished at the volume of lorry traffic travelling along this route, in each direction, along mountain roads with multiple hairpin bends. At the Russian border itself, there was a tailback of lorries waiting to cross over, reminiscent of lorry queues at Dover. We visited a large, brand new monastery from where the border was visible. (Could the building of the monastery in this location be a political statement?) The lorries seemed to originate from different countries: some were labelled 'Propane' but it was generally impossible to judge what goods were being transported - and in which direction. What was apparent, however, was the investment of Chinese money in that region. The Chinese are building an 8-km tunnel to avoid the worst of the hairpins as part of the 'New Silk Road' initiative. It looked to be nearing completion. It would certainly cut journey times but wouldn't help with queues to cross the border.

One evening, at the end of a meal in a restaurant, I was approached by an extremely polite young man who asked if he could speak to me in English. All conversation had been in English that evening, so he couldn't have guessed my interest in Russia. He was visiting Georgia from a town in Siberia for a conference, and explained how difficult it was for him to speak English in current circumstances. 'We Russians are now infamous' he told me. It was a brief encounter, but I found it very moving. I felt that it validated what we as an association are doing to keep friendship contacts alive in these difficult times.

* * * * *

Book review by *Marcus Ferrar*

A new book on St Petersburg: devastating and deeply touching



Redolent with imperial history, rich in culture and tormented by the German siege of World War II: these fascinating and terrifying qualities of the former Russian capital are evoked magisterially in a new book by Sinclair McKay, 'Saint Petersburg: Sacrifice and Redemption in the City That Defied Hitler'.

It focusses on the awful suffering of the people in the German siege of 1941 to 1943. In every gruesome detail Sinclair describes how thousands starved in the freezing winter of 1941/2 – stomachs revolting against scraps of bread laced with sawdust, apathy, weakening, dysentery, and gradually fading away into death, to be dragged in sheets through the streets to join frozen corpses piled high for burial. Meanwhile German bombing and artillery fire suppressed all forms of normal social life.

Eventually trucks could drive across the nearby frozen Ladoga lake, but a fair number crashed through into the icy waters with their cargoes of incoming food or children being evacuated.

As in his earlier books about Dresden and Berlin, Sinclair delves into the rich lives of a population facing Armageddon. In 1940s St Petersburg – then Leningrad – this meant the refined cultural worlds of Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Akhmatova, the Kirov opera and ballet – and their many followers.

Shostakovich composed a new 7th Symphony, broadcast live in 1942 as soon as players were strong enough to perform. It quickly spread throughout the world, symbolising Russian defiance of Nazi aggression. Thaw meant trams could run again: "The rough melody of their bells made hearts jump: they sounded like life."

Remarkably Sinclair also enters into the minds of the besieging Germans, daunted by swamps, freezing cold and vast distances. They could see the city they were shelling; but in the end they heard Russian loudspeakers taunting and threatening them by name.

Sinclair thanks Russian friends and acquaintances for their "invaluable guidance", but refrains from naming them: "The regime has a paranoid sensitivity to any areas of study that might show the nation or its past rulers in an unflattering light: tell what is perceived to be the wrong story and you are a traitor."

On 9th July we held our annual garden party. More than 40 members and their guests came, including Sergei Shchebetenko, a social psychologist who visited Oxford in 2008 as one of the young teachers from Perm State University. He is now on a short research visit at Manchester University so he was able to give us recent news of Perm. We also welcomed several Russian and Ukrainian visitors.

On 28th September at the North Oxford Community Centre, Rosamund Bartlett gave a talk to 55 members and guests on ‘Tchaikovsky, Chekhov and Levitan’. She beautifully combined accounts of the lives and work of the composer, the writer and the artist with music, readings, and paintings displayed on the screen. Members of the audience were particularly impressed by the paintings of Levitan since these are virtually unseen and unknown outside Russia.



photo: Rosamund Bartlett, Sally Richards

On 5th October Alexander Mercouris gave a talk to the OPA Russian Discussion Group on ‘Russia and Ukraine: An Appraisal’. In this talk he explained the Russian point of view in the current war, and emphasised how sad it was that the peace talks in Istanbul, a month after Russia’s invasion, were at first successful, and then countermanded. After his talk Mercouris answered many questions with detailed knowledge of the situation. 50 members and guests attended the talk which was chaired by Gilliane Sills.

Both talks were among the most successful and best attended in the history of the Association.

Future event: On Sunday, 9th November, at 3 pm. Kat Kottonen will introduce another film screening at 6 Rawlinson Road. The film is yet to be decided, but members have asked for a ‘late Soviet film’.

* * * * *

Russian Language Exchange

Graham Dane, a member of the Oxford Perm Association, runs the Edinburgh International Russian Language exchange (Эдинбургская международная англо-русскоязычная группа).

The next Zoom session is on Sunday 9 November 2025 from 10.00 to 11.30 am GMT. Chat to people from other countries. Meet people from your own country. Three 25 minute conversations, half in Russian and half in English. You will be in a group of about three people for each chat. There are usually about 18 people attending and the groups change every 30 minutes.

Meeting link:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84247799935?pwd=c0cxTk92YUFCMET6eitqMkYvdjRrUT09>

Meeting ID: 842 4779 9935 Passcode: 1234

Please join the meeting 5 minutes before the time. Message Graham if you have any questions grahamdane@yahoo.com

Last month (in May) at a charities' conference, I ran into Hassan, the prime mover in the initiative which took a large group of 14-year-olds from East Oxford to Perm in 2017. Members of our association had supported the initiative financially; some of us had been more directly involved. It was many years since I had seen Hassan so it took me a few moments to recognise him. However, once he started speaking I remembered his unmistakable and infectious enthusiasm as he expanded on how he, with the support of his friends, had set up the Oxford Community Action group in the dark days of Covid and which continues to flourish today!

Why am I writing this? Because once we had recognised each other, Hassan was eager to tell some of the others about the famous football exchange with Perm in 2017-18. He said the then 14-year-olds are now 22; that most of them still rate their visit to Perm as a defining event of their lives owing to the incredible, and unexpected, reception they had from the Permians. He added they all keep in touch with each other via WhatsApp. He at any rate keeps in touch with his opposite number in Perm and some of the boys may do the same (though that would have to be checked). He also recalled how enthused and amused their hosts in Perm were at the arrival of such a polyglot collection of young English working-class lads, so different from the Oxford professors and academics they were accustomed to meeting.

Thinking about it afterwards almost brought tears to my eyes. At the time of the return visit of the Russians (which coincided with a multi-national football tournament and with which I was involved practically every day), I had the feeling that the Cowley boys had been virtually left out. The games were all played on the other side of town at Hill End, where there was also accommodation. I don't think Hassan's boys ever played alongside the other teams. However, it seems that some contact was re-established between them and the Permian boys, which helped keep alive the friendships already formed.

At a time when war in Ukraine has been raging for over three years and our contact with the Permians has been stopped in its tracks, the committee feels it important that the Association remembers its successful collaborations in the past (and the hope for better days ahead). For reasons that are now lost in the mists of time, the report that I researched and wrote after the group had returned only had a limited digital circulation before disappearing without trace. So here, for the first time (and newly discovered on an old USB stick!), is the original.

According to Google Earth the distance to Perm (in the Urals) from Oxford is 2,754.9 miles – more than five times the distance from Land's End in Cornwall to John O'Groats in Scotland and four time zones ahead of Britain. It was flown over a single, long July day and night by seventeen under-16-year-old footballers from East Oxford United and four parents, together with coach, Abdillahi Omar, and manager, Hassan Sabrie. Bussed up to Heathrow in the early hours by Oxford Bus Company on a complementary bus, the group flew to Moscow before transferring several hours later on to an internal flight for the 900 mile 'hop' to Perm. When they finally arrived at their destination in the forest – the Perm summer youth camp – at 4am the next morning, they were greeted by music, dancing and Russian cakes at the start of an adventure which, for most of them, confounded expectations.

It is fair and reasonable to say that, despite a twinning that has lasted 25 years, most organisations in Oxford don't know where Perm is. When told that it is in Russia, near the Ural mountains, and the gateway to Siberia, most would think that it must be a pretty cold place - even in summer. Given the frosty relations between the British government and Russia's President Putin, it would be understandable if most thought Perm not much of a holiday destination compared to warmer locations nearer home. Why you wanna go there?

What's more, this was no ordinary Oxford youth team with mainly white faces and a few black or mixed-race players, rather the reverse: there were only two white faces in a squad made up overwhelmingly of black and brown players. From Poland to Sudan in the south and from Afghanistan to Jamaica and Canada in the west, East Oxford United is a club that lives and breathes internationalism, even if practically all of them were born in Oxford. Some boys also worried that being Muslim could be a problem, too.

So here was a paradox: on the one hand the boys, their parents and people from all over Oxford (All Souls to Tesco) had spent months raising funds to help pay for the visas and air tickets to take them to Perm and back, yet at the same time, many were unsure whether they were going to their "holiday of a lifetime" or being sentenced to 17 days in hell, as the pessimists predicted! In the event their fears disappeared as quickly as the snow in springtime. With the weather in August hotter and certainly dryer than in Oxford, warm clothes were left in the suitcase. Yes, there was the odd remark on the field in the heat of competition. But that was nothing compared to the camaraderie and friendships built during more than a fortnight of playing and living together.

At first the visitors could have been pardoned for thinking that they had arrived at a boot camp, such was the physicality of the camp's regime. At 7am they were woken by their mentor, Katya. Breakfast exposed a clash of eating cultures: the British-weaned children disliked what they considered to be "stodgy porridge", whereas the adults (the Somalians at any rate) said approvingly that it reminded them of eating "porridge back home"! Later those who wanted to were allowed to go to the adults' guest house and eat cereals.

At 8.30am sharp more than two hours of training followed by a game began. The early start was a shock to the boys' systems but took advantage of the coolest part of the day. As the holiday progressed, so the strength and fitness of the squad increased. Undeniably there was an element of emulation, if not competition, at work. It was a culture shock to be confronted by superbly fit, similarly-aged Russians who had army-style endurance and could overcome every physical challenge placed in their way. Not that "our boys" lacked football skills that could be put to good use as was displayed at the end of the holiday when they came a creditable third in a knock-out competition. As 14-year-old Abdullah pointed out, the Russian teams "were very brave, their football was very physical. This was very good for us as it made us work harder and get better."

Following the routine, an early lunch was followed by two hours rest. Then followed another footballing session before the break for tea – biscuits, fruit and green tea – to general approval. As time went on, other sports were introduced – basketball, netball, hockey and table tennis. Teams could be mixed – Russian - British, boys and girls on the same side. They might not be able to understand each others' languages but they quickly discovered their own ways of communicating! Indeed, on the day of departure the boys played a Russian girls side and anticipated an easy time. That was until the girls were leading 2-0 and victory suddenly became all-important. The final scoreline, 5-3 to Oxford, was a fair reflection of a challenging game.

At 5pm there was a change of mood. Football having been set aside for the day, it was now the turn of dancing to be practised and performed. Guided by their teachers, Katya and Sasha, they prepared a programme of (Russian) dance, hip-hop and disco for their host audience. After several days' rehearsals, this was then performed at the evening show to the assembled camp. To be sure, the exotic, multi-cultural composition of the British group was a magnet and invited enthusiastic photography. As Saif, Abdullah's older brother, remarked with a smile and a shoulder-shrug, "it was our first and last day to be famous."

On other days the group had use of a free coach (on permanent stand-by) provided by their hosts to go to Perm either to play a game or watch Russian teams play. In fact on the longer coach journeys, when they made outings to watch a professional football game or visit a sight, the travelling became an event in itself. For 13-year-old Ibrahim, whose family comes from Khartoum in Sudan, the coach was where everyone sang together and left him with some of his best memories.

Afterwards there was often a chance to visit and stroll about the city. For some it was the first time they'd had the opportunity to walk around a large city with its heady mixture of colourful sights and people on the move. For others it was more a question of stocking up at the supermarkets and ubiquitous open markets with those comfort foods that the camp's canteen did not supply. And though the boys might be cash-strapped at home, in Russia – with Western sanctions against Putin's Russia biting and a weak rouble – they could even feel rich for a few minutes. On return they would have supper. Afterwards many drifted off to the disco where youngsters could chill out or raise the heat according to mood before a final snack and drink, and then off to bed.

Of course, none of this would have happened without the amazing generosity and kindness of their Russian hosts. This continued right until the moment of departure. For Abdullah, who had been put at ease on arrival by the lined ranks of singing dancers, it was the emotional farewells at the end – attended by all 400 camp dwellers – that underlined how much they cared about all of them and left him with his best memory.

Nor did the flight home mean the end of all contact: Snapchat is used by Polish-born Mateusz to communicate with Ignad, one of the gym instructors. Maybe the fact that Mateusz's father, Sebastian Edward, who also travelled to Perm, learnt Russian at school helps communication. Now plans for a similar number of Perm boys to come over to Oxford in August 2018 have been drawn up. With the 2018 World Cup being played in Russia in July, it is hoped that teams from other twin cities (Bonn, Leiden and Grenoble, if not Leon) could also be invited for an international youth get-together. With less than 10 months to go and so much preparatory work to be done, expectations are mounting. For those who want to assist, now is the time to get involved.

