



# PERM NEWS

Oxford Perm Association

Newsletter Jan 2015

## **Perm City Council, inter-ethnic issues and community: learning from Oxford**

*As most readers will know, not only is Perm a much larger city than Oxford (about one million versus 150,000 inhabitants) but Perm City council and administration have much more power than our own local authority. Nonetheless, on the particular issues that the Perm delegation came to examine, both sides have considerable responsibilities within their communities.*

In November a group of four people from Perm City Council and Administration visited Oxford for a very particular purpose. They were Aleksei Griбанov, Deputy Chief Executive of Perm City Administration, Councillor Andrei Solodnikov, Lev Gershanok, the Head of the Analytical Department and Tatiana Grigoieva, the Head of International Relations.

Early in 2014 President Putin had indicated that bringing about good interethnic and inter-religious relations should be regarded as a priority in the multi-ethnic Russian Federation. According to the new Federal Law this issue has become the responsibility of municipal authorities who had to prepare reports on what they were doing to solve any tensions.

Taking into account the fact that Oxford has many ethnic groups, Mayor Sapko and Perm City Council decided that they would like to study some approaches, policies and achievements of Oxford in this field. So a special programme was made for the Perm delegation with meetings with Oxford councillors and officers who dealt with these issues and all of them were very constructive and helpful. With the help of Merilyn Davies, who is a twinning officer with the Oxford City administration, we got exactly what we needed.

A very interesting meeting was organized with participation of the leaders of different ethnic communities at the Asian Centre. It was obvious that these groups realize their place in the city community, understand both their own identity and how they can cooperate with the authorities for the mutual benefit. For example, some time ago the Asian Centre with a mosque was purpose-built. Authorities are working closely with each of diasporas - whether Muslims, Indians, Africans. The task is to "fit" the inhabitants in



the context of the city, so that they are not confined to their narrow ethnic environment. The level of tolerance in Oxford is high. The proof of it is the fact that Mr. Mohammad Abbasi, who was born in Pakistan, was elected the Lord Mayor of Oxford in 2014.

A related interest for us was the Oxford approach to Community Centres. Perm people know very well that Community Centres in our city were opened by the inspiration from Oxford. This idea was borrowed during a study visit of Perm city councillors in 2005 (Aleksei Griбанov was among them) and since then 33 Community centres had been open in Perm!

This time the delegation made visits to three community centres in order to see the work from the inside, to analyse and compare our and their problems and how they are solved. Perm CC (community centres) provide premises for NGOs and socially orientated organisations and serve as venues for events for the microdistricts where they are located, whereas Oxford community centres are concentrated on being a point of attraction for communities and do not have fixed offices for organisations. They also do a lot of fundraising and are able to earn money to be spent for their activities. Most of the centres are managed by a special community association, only two of them are under direct control of the municipality. By the way, each Oxford centre is equipped with a small kitchen, and this affects the involvement of residents.

What struck us as very impressive was the work with young people. Almost everyone of Oxford's experts talked about how stereotypical was the idea of Oxford. In the city there is the oldest university in the UK, and it seems that people in Oxford are all intellectuals with a very high standard of living. However, the city has a large number of disadvantaged areas, where many of the unemployed in the third generation of unemployed people, and all of these areas are under scrutiny of the city authorities. Special programmes are crafted to "shake up" troubled teens, to show them the way to a more prosperous life, and the beginning of such a life could be attendance of a municipal swimming pool at an affordable price.

It is significant that with "difficult" young people there work other young people and they do it sincerely and with great dedication. Perm has a Youth City Council which is rather active now and we think some more contacts and collaboration can be made between Oxford and Perm in this field.

In our studies of both inter-ethnic problems and the work of community centres, we found meetings and discussions with Oxford City Council officers very helpful. They were very well prepared with concise presentations and eagerly answered our questions. Everywhere we saw a complex approach to dealing with challenges based on diverse analysis. We are particularly grateful to Councillors Cook, van Coulter and Lygo. We are very thankful to Bob Price who spent considerable time with the Perm group and we had a very honest talk about the policy of OCC, of political parties' roles and this let Perm participants to look at their own work through a different angle.

Colin Cook also gave us a lot of information on specific details of councillors' work in their wards, running election campaign etc. Lev Gershanok was struck by differences of work with voters. "Constituencies in Oxford are less than in Perm. If we have 35-45 thousand people per constituency, they have about 5 thousand people. Before deciding any important issue something like a sociological study is carried out. For example, we were shown how a built-up area was developed. Before making any decision, the city government asked people what problems there were in the area and what facilities were needed. Only then there was worked out the technical assignment for the development of the built-up area. I think in Perm we should also apply such forms of outreach."

We think that continuation of councillors' contacts will be useful for both sides. Mayor Sapko has already sent a letter to Bob Price and invited an Oxford delegation to visit Perm in October 2015 to celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Oxford-Perm twinning.

The Perm delegation stayed on for a short seminar for all the twin cities on housing and for the Remembrance Day ceremony. They met the Mayors of Bonn, Leiden and

Grenoble. And it was (or wasn't) amazing that at the Mayoral reception ALL the leaders spoke about the great importance of twinning links, of people-to-people relations which remain a deep foundation for mutual understanding and cooperation.

Remembrance Day was a very special event and very touching. The solemnity of the ceremony, crowds of people, international representatives ... The words about peace in the world and remembrance of those who perished in wars, about duty and freedom went into the heart of us, Russians, who never forget about the Second World War - our Great Patriotic War.

*Tatiana Grigorieva*

## **V.I.P. in Russia**

When the possibility of visiting Perm presented itself I thought, as I always do, 'Will it be possible given that I am severely visually impaired?' Well, I'm back to tell the tale so here's how it went.

First of all I booked assistance at the airports in London and Moscow. This worked like a dream. From the moment I arrived at Heathrow I was placed in the care of staff who accompany passengers with disabilities through the airport and into the aeroplane. In Moscow it was the same and I was able to speed through immigration etc in a stress free fashion. The return journey was the same and I have nothing but praise for the staff in both cities who made the journey so much easier.

During the whole visit I had to depend on the help of my companions who shared out this assistance so that each day a different person took the initiative to help; sometimes my guide would ask someone else to offer their arm so that they could take photos or spend a bit longer looking at an interesting piece in a museum. I am really grateful for all the help Alison, Sue, Carole, Rico, Chris and John gave me as sometimes the pavements were uneven, and steps and staircases too. Not many buildings we visited were adapted for easy access and I know that people in wheelchairs have a very difficult life. I think there is legislation about accessibility but that comes from central government and the regions are not always able or willing to implement it.

My wonderful hosts, Danil and Olga, were terrific. I really enjoyed staying with them, and their inquisitive cat, in their apartment not far from the University. They are a young couple, he teaches physics and she works in the International Department at the university. They were so kind and considerate and made life simple in the flat. Both of them were happy to give me an arm when we went out and never failed to warn me of hazards in the way. This kindness gave me a lot of confidence.

Karen arranged a visit for me to the Perm Association for the Visually Impaired and Hearing Impaired. The Director is himself a V.I.P and the visit was most interesting as I learnt about the history of the association and the work they do. They gave me a wonderful DVD, made in 2013, which, although I don't understand the speakers, gives an inspirational and comprehensive picture of the lives, challenges and accomplishments of V.I.P.s in the Perm Region. The film looks at all age groups, work and leisure and has several interviews with V.I.Ps. I'm going to ask a Russian speaking friend to watch the film with me to translate, although as I am learning Russian it's good for me to watch alone to see if I can pick up the gist of the speakers.

Watching this documentary about V.I.P.s in Perm makes me realise that my visit to them only scratched the surface of what they do and I really want to return to learn more.

*Susan Clarkson*

## Russia and Development: Capitalism, Civil Society and the State

By Charles Buxton, Zed Books, 2014

Charles Buxton (see his article in the September 2011 issue of Perm News - available on our web site) was a VSO worker and NGO activist for past 20 years, first in east Europe countries including Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Russia, and later based in Central Asia with extended visits to areas such as Kyrgyzstan (to where Buxton moved in 2002) and Uzbekistan, and including Perm. His extensive background in the history of Russia, the Russian Federation and adjacent countries makes him an expert in his chosen field of work and research and readers of this book are aware of this knowledge with his clear exposition of the many changes over a long period and at different levels of the societies he discusses. The book covers a wide geographical area and many centuries of history.

The early chapters of this book give a thorough overview of the history of civil society and development in Russia in the context of local democratic institutes starting with the village meeting (*skhod*), later the establishment of the *veche* or town council, and subsequently when the Tsars made limited efforts to open up government to social groups such as the *boyars* or feudal lords. The book describes the evolution of such organizations from the early Tsarist era including the significance of Peter the Great in the development of the iron and steel building industry extending to Siberia and including the Urals area and the effect on societies and the changes in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries including under Tsar Catherine the Great and in the late 1880s the significance of the intelligentsia as representatives of the liberal professions such as writers, thinkers, historians. Various phases of the revolutionary periods are examined starting with 1905 and then expanding in detail with the post soviet period when perestroika allowed Siberian activists to implement regionalism again with the help of higher education establishments like the Siberian academy of sciences Novosibirsk. What happened in Russia in the 1990s is one of the main arguments for those who oppose economic shock therapy and unregulated market capitalism. The author explains how after the 1990s projects based on adherence to western models neglecting the country's history and culture failed.

There are many case studies used in the book as illustrations. Of particular interest to Readers of Perm News is chapter 5 on local government in 1990s and 2000s. Buxton reports that VSO work in the Urals was particularly challenging because the Urals had been a 'closed' region for decades and so people were not used to communicating with westerners. Volunteer contributions compare Perm, Yekaterinburg, Cheliabinsk: new skills introduced included palliative care and HIV/AIDS, diabetes care, with disability also being a major focus. Perm was relatively free from outside pressure in the nineties. The post of elected Mayor was created initially representing commercial trading interests with a vice Mayor from the Yabloko party and implementing many of the democratic innovations promoted by Moscow. By 2000 the dominant sectors were raw material extraction and communications. Only towards the end of the decade did the Perm private sector leaders turn their attention to politics at city level. Eventually local government only achieved 'quasi-autonomy'. By late 1990s several NGOs had gained a strong reputation in the city (Perm Hospice, established with the help of health sector partners in the UK is quoted as an example). The author continues to state that many of the new initiatives have stood the test of time and the system of 'social orders' has run for over ten years with NGO representatives playing a significant role in designing and monitoring programmes. Buxton also reports the fact that there is an active Public Chamber (*obschestvennaya palata*), which institution was set up by Putin and approved by the Duma in 2005, and which brings together the government and civil society sectors. The Oxford (city and county) twinning and the exchange visits by Perm local officials to the UK in opening twenty new community centres is acknowledged. The author also reports positively on the

successful cultural scene in Perm (avant-garde art, modern art museum, White Nights festival, Diaghilev festival). In the same chapter the author comments on Vladimir Putin's recentralizing, top-down policies from the early 2000s and the public approval received, restoring order and bringing the oligarchs to heel, accompanied by a more stable economy and reduction in crime rates. The book discusses the Komi-Perm autonomous area and its disappearance from recent maps and the fact that this was a result of a decision to merge it with the Perm region. It goes on to mention the relative poverty of Komi-Perm and the feeling of its inhabitants that its autonomy was given away too easily.

Buxton continues in chapter 6 with a discussion of development challenges in Tajikistan and in chapter 7 he talks about social movements and protest in the 2000s. The final chapters discuss the international context, the fact that Russia is a raw-materials oriented economy with a semi-authoritarian political regime, issues around the world trade organization and its membership of the BRIC country grouping. An interesting statistic presented is that the Gini inequality coefficient for Russia is virtually the same as that for the USA. In the concluding Postscript chapter, Buxton reminds readers that Russia has had a tradition of citizens involvement in democratic and development processes from Tsarist through Soviet times to the present and that after the failed shock therapy of the 1990s Russia is slowly recovering. This is a fascinating book, specially for many of us who have made the effort to visit Russia and wish to follow its evolution.

*Reviewed by David Roulston*

## **You are invited to the Oxford Perm Association**

### **ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

This will be held on *Thursday, 12th February at 6 p.m* in the Long Room at Oxford Town Hall. (This is where we held the AGM last year and it proved to be a most successful venue.)

The official business will start at 6.15 after an introductory drink and nibbles for everyone. Once the business is over, Carole Richardson will be talking to us about Russian folk art and crafts. Carole, who went to Perm last September, has been many times to Russia exploring these different crafts and sometimes trying out the skills herself. She has plenty of examples for you to look at, so this should be a particularly interesting talk.

Wine will be provided by the Association. If any members want to contribute nibbles we would be most grateful.

## More events and requests for accomodation

See the main Special Events information on the end page of this newsletter for details of our **20<sup>th</sup> anniversary year celebrations**, with excellent musical visiting groups from Perm.

We are looking for Association members who can provide B&B accommodation for one or two of the dancers in April. If you have offers or questions about this, please get in touch with Karen Hewitt <karen.hewitt@conted.ox.ac.uk> or phone 01865-515635.

Details of summer and autumn talks for our Oxford Perm Twinning 2015 celebrations will be given in our next issue.

## Newsletter and web site

Newsletter articles, book reviews, letters are always welcome for this Newsletter. The submission **deadline for the spring issue is 15<sup>th</sup> May** but it greatly assists planning if you let the editor (David Roulston: djrouls@btinternet.com) know if you plan to submit an item or to discuss an idea for the newsletter or web site [www.oxfordperm-assoc.org](http://www.oxfordperm-assoc.org).

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## Modern Russian Writing and the Russian Booker Prize

On 29<sup>th</sup> October David Gowan, the British representative on the Russian Booker Prize committee gave a fascinating talk to members of the Association. He told us about the history of this prize, the organisation of the committee and the judges, and the efforts to discover and support excellent Russian writing over the last twenty years.

David provided the audience with a useful handout, listing ten notable writers and some of their novels which have (or ought to have) been translated. He drew on this list to discuss the individual authors and to give us lively and enticing accounts of their novels.

Frustratingly, the works which he praised most highly seem not to have been translated; however in the discussion afterwards we learnt of fine translators, informative websites and accessible e-books. Many members left the talk fully resolved to explore new Russian writing: perhaps they made it their New Year Resolution!

*Karen Hewitt*

[Copies of the booklist are available for members who were unable to attend the talk]

## My Perm – A Sentimental Journey: Permyak – Salty Ears

For anyone from outside Perm Region this saying makes no sense. Let alone a monument of the same name... Not surprisingly a couple of years ago the “Russian World” magazine declared it the strangest monument in Russia. The tone of the article accompanying the rating was rather critical, showing clearly that the authors couldn’t see any reason for erecting such a sculpture besides the desire to shock and amuse the city visitors.



For Permians, however, this monument goes far beyond an unusual piece of urban decoration. For years and years people from the Perm region have been called, sometimes affectionately, sometimes slightly derogatory by the name of “Permyak – soleniye ushi (salty ears)”, and what could be more fitting than, instead of dismissing or hiding this fact of regional heritage, - to celebrate it in one of the most central locations in the city?

Those salty ears strongly connect our present with the history of Perm region. The Kama region has served as the almost exclusive salt source of Russia for centuries. The trade was hard and for decades used only manual labour. The bags filled with salt had to be carried from place to place on workers shoulders and, grain by grain, salt fell behind their collar, rubbing into their necks and ears. The consequences of being in this trade for years, unfortunately, were very harmful. The ears of a salt carrier became very inflamed, and it made him immediately recognisable anywhere he went as a “Permian – salty ears”. Eventually, this nickname was used for all residents of the Perm region.

Today, however, Permians are proud of it! Almost at any point in time you can see someone sticking their heads into the ring between two big “salty” ears to be photographed. Practically every Permian or visitor of the city can boast of such a portrait in their photo collection. And why not? The strangest monument in Russia is definitely unique, not only in its design, but in its ability to link our history to our present and to celebrate the hard workers of the past, who contributed to the development of the region today.



Watch the birdie!

*Julia Budnik - Grantham*

## Oxford Perm Association 20 years of twinning

### We are celebrating!

Special Events for our 'Oxford Perm 2015' programme will include

1. 'Yarmarka' – the professional Perm folk dancers and musicians, winners of many Russian awards – will be in Oxford from 15<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> April for a range of public and community events. Please reserve tickets for their final performance in the Town Hall at 7.30 on Friday, 24<sup>th</sup> April.
2. 'Karavai' – the Perm Balalaika quartet, already well-known and much loved by Oxford concertgoers – will be playing at St Barnabas Church, Oxford, on 11<sup>th</sup> September at 7.30.
- 3 A series of talks on Russian history and culture and the Russian way of life, with particular reference to Perm will be held from June to October. Details of these talks will be in our next Newsletter.

The Oxford Perm Association acknowledges the support of Oxford City Council and Oxford International Links in helping to fund these events.



The events are funded through a range of Perm Association activities and Oxford City Council support.

**These events in 2015 are additional to our usual programme. Do invite your to friends become members of the Oxford Perm Association. As members they will enjoy**

- 1 Personal meetings and entertainment with visitors from Perm, including teachers from Perm State University
2. A lively newsletter three times a year
- 3 Opportunities to visit Perm, enjoy Russian hospitality, make new friends and develop professional connections
4. Talks on Russian themes, theatre visits to Russian plays and other cultural events.