

Oxford and Perm - a brief history of the twinning links

This is a condensed history of the twinning link between Oxford and Perm. Because there are so many aspects to the story of Oxford and Perm, we have been unable to describe everything chronologically. The history starts with the initial contacts in 1989 between the universities, followed in 1990 by links between the voluntary sectors. The relationship has evolved over the years to include cultural exchanges and co-operation in diverse activities and has involved a wide variety of Oxford and Perm participants. Many, but not all of them, are mentioned in the account. The history is divided into the following sections, although there is inevitably and rightly some overlap:

- Academic links
- Voluntary and Civic Organizations
- Twinning Organizations
- Cultural Links
- Conclusion

Academic links

In 1985 when Perm was still a city closed to the outside world, Karen Hewitt, a tutor in Literature at Oxford University Department for Continuing Education, invited to tea three Russian university teachers who were on a British Council course in Oxford. One of the three guests came from Perm State University and talked enthusiastically about his home in the Urals. Karen, horrified at the notion of a city of a million which was closed to all foreigners, asked for the address of any specialist in English literature at the University and was soon writing to Boris Proskurnin.



*photo: Boris Proskurnin,
London 1990*

In 1988 Mikhail Gorbachev decreed that Perm was now open to the world. Karen decided to see this secret city for herself and, actively supported by Perm State University, she obtained a visa that would allow her to teach at the university. This was the first visa issued to a foreigner to work in Perm.

Преподавателя ОКСФОРДСКОГО университета Кэриен Хьюитт (Великобритания)			
№	АУДИТОРИЯ	ВРЕМЯ	ТЕМА
89.	314-Э	15ч.	Политическая система Великобритании
9.	314-Э	15ч.	Классическая детская литература Великобритании
1.	314-Э	15ч.	Система образования в Великобритании

*photo: poster announcing
Karen Hewitt's lectures*

During Karen's six weeks in Perm in April-May 1989 she taught at the university, spoke to hundreds of people, witnessed the elections to the first (and last) Soviet Congress of People's Deputies, visited villages and dachas, museums, large flats and communal flats, beautiful parks and grim suburbs. She took part in demonstrations, school visits, and long complicated meetings with bewildered Communist Party officials. The Rector of PSU, Vladimir Malanin (equivalent of our Vice-Chancellor), who was well aware of how intellectually isolated Perm was, asked if Karen could establish a link with Oxford University. At that time the Soviet Union was the most exciting country in the world for observers from other countries, so it was not difficult to persuade Oxford University to set up a link between the two universities.

From the beginning, the link was very active in practical schemes. In 1990 the first of the annual groups of Perm teachers arrived in Oxford; a couple of years later, the first Oxford postgraduates went to Perm. (Early subjects for research included a thesis on how oaks grown in difficult conditions could make good barrels for whisky; and on the structures and functioning of the Perm mafia). Karen Hewitt received an honorary professorship from Perm State University for her contributions to the academic links. Her efforts subsequently led to writing and editing a substantial series of books published for Russian readers interested in learning about Britain.

In the late 1990s a new course in social work was developed at Perm State University by Ruskin College, Oxford, while Perm Pedagogical University worked with the Education Department at Oxford University on special training for teachers to educate disabled children. Using a British government grant from the Know How Fund, specialists in politics from Oxford and Perm Universities, led by Nicholas Owen of Queen's College, developed a three-year project comparing government institutions, theory and practice in Britain and Russia. Together they wrote a book called 'In Search of Good Government' which is used in the politics faculties of Russian universities.



photo: Karen Hewitt receiving honorary professorship - Perm State University, 1991

In 2000 Perm geography students took Oxford geography students paddling down the River Visshera in the north of Perm Region - a startling experience for both sides. The leader of the Oxford group was Professor Judith Pallot. Out of that experience has come her original Oxford research on prison colonies in Russia, since many of them exist in the north of Perm Region. Professor Pallot has now published widely on the prison colony system.

A large and experimental project developed between the two universities, starting in 2013. Each year geologists, physicists, chemists, geographers and biologists from Oxford, both graduates and undergraduates, come to Perm for a six week summer internship. This project is funded by BP which hopes to encourage bright students into a career in the oil industry. However effective that may be, the feedback from the interns, starting with a handful in 2013, was so enthusiastic that in 2016 more than 30 of them spent the summer in Perm. (See, for example, the newsletter Perm News for October 2014.) By 2019, even though BP had reduced, overall, the funding for the

scheme, 30 Oxford students were still choosing to study for the summer in Perm.



photo: Oxford students in Perm Krai 2014

In the opposite direction a number of Perm professors continue to spend short periods of research in Oxford, sometimes leading to co-operation with their Oxford colleagues on joint academic projects.

In the 2014 New Year's Honours list, Karen Hewitt, then Chair of the Association, was awarded an MBE for 'services to building academic and cultural understanding between the UK and Russia'.

In October 2016, Perm State University celebrated its one-hundredth anniversary with three days of festival, exhibitions, debates, student feasting and music, dancing, a history of the university on stage at the Opera and Ballet Theatre, and a special performance of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*. The visiting Oxford contingent included three professors and the university's International Officer.

The longest-lasting of all the schemes has been the exchange of teachers from Perm State University and adults from different backgrounds from Oxford. Every September since 1990 – nearly thirty years - a group of eight adults have visited Perm as guests of Perm University. They stay there for two weeks; in return, six teachers from PSU come to Oxford to follow a three-week course on British society and culture in November of the same year.

By 2019 PSU had welcomed well over two hundred and thirty guests on this scheme - teachers, librarians, doctors, social workers, piano teachers, physicists, builders, lawyers, artists, policemen, people involved in all kinds of business from the oil industry to local crafts, and many retired people with their own skills and enthusiasms. Oxford University Department for Continuing Education has provided courses on contemporary Britain, for one hundred and eighty PSU teachers from all faculties. The academic connections continue to flourish.

Voluntary and civic organizations

We have to go back again to 1989, when a group of active Oxford citizens were discussing the idea of forming a link between Oxford and 'somewhere in Eastern Europe' now that the Soviet bloc countries were open to the west. When they met Boris Proskurnin, (see above) who had been invited to Oxford in 1990, it was clear to them that Perm was an obvious choice. Their first contact was with the Perm Society of Disabled People. In October 1990, Liz Brighthouse, Director of the Oxfordshire Council for Voluntary Action, and Deb Manley, a tireless enthusiast for practical social links, were invited by the Vice Chairman of the All Russian Society of Disabled People, Vera Shishkina and the Chairman of the Society, Stanislav Pastukhov, to visit Perm to discuss the role of voluntary organizations with City and Regional officials. At this time voluntary organizations were just beginning to be established in Perm (and all

over Russia) as most had been banned in the 1960s. As well as meeting with the local authorities, sessions were held with the Blind Society, Deaf Society, Afghan War Veterans, Red Cross, Lenin Children's Fund, Charity and Health and the Church. The first of many agreements was signed during the visit. The trip was funded by the Charities Aid Foundation and the Know How Fund (official channel for British Aid to Russia).



*photo: volunteers group,
Perm 1991*

In March 1991 representatives from Perm voluntary organizations, the Church, and Local Authorities visited Oxford. They included Stanislav Pastukhov, the Vice Chairman of the Regional Council, the chief officers of the Red Cross and the Deaf Society, the Mayor of Kungur, a priest of the Orthodox Church and an interpreter. A Perm Disability Association was formed and, when financial difficulties became a threat, £1,000 was raised to keep the Perm Disability Centre open. The programme of visits and lectures was funded by the Helen Hamlyn Foundation, Beatrice Webb Memorial Trust, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Soros Foundation and the Know How Fund. It became clear that all the on-going work should be carried out in co-operation with local government. This decision was to be invaluable in enabling the development of civic links and supporting OCVA when

considerable amounts of money from various funders were used to employ people in Perm to deliver programmes.

A further two visits took place during 1991. One of the participants in the October 1991 visits was Tim Southgate, the Headteacher of the Ormerod Special School and this led to an intensive programme with the Department of Education working with the Pedagogical Institute in Perm training teachers working in Special Schools. The Oxfordshire Perm Voluntary Action Link (OPVAL) was set up as a sub-committee of OCVA at this time to oversee the work of the link. OPVAL continued to carry out this function for 10 years and it also brought together the various groups working in Perm.

A few hundred people were involved in exchanges over the next 13 years and many other developments can be traced back to the work carried out by OCVA. Many of the people from Perm who were involved at the beginning continue to be active in the Oxford Perm Link and continue to work with the organizations they were introduced to through the link. This includes the Hospice in Perm and Sobell House (the Oxford Hospice). Natalia Pereverseva, from the Perm Hospice, visited Oxford and this contributed greatly to developing the Cancer Information Centre in Perm and to working with volunteers. The Director of OCVA opened the Cancer Information Centre in Perm in 2001. During that visit the Director spoke at the Perm Day Celebrations to several thousand people packed into the square and roads around the Drama Theatre and Legislative Assembly. Two of the largest projects of this period were:

i) the setting up of a Disability Information Centre with a grant from the European TACIS (Technical Assistants to the Commonwealth of Independent States) Fund. The project was supported and directed in Perm by the Society of Disabled People with the involvement of Oxfordshire Council of Disabled People and Disability in Oxford.



*photo: Natalia Pereverseva -
first Perm Hospice, c 1993*

ii) In 1995 and 1996, a programme funded by the British Foreign Office and the Community Fund of the National Lottery and called 'Democracy in Action' was created. This enabled representatives of local government, voluntary associations, the media, the universities and the legal professions from both sides to get involved and resulted in the Twinning Link between Perm Region and Oxfordshire being set up; the friendship link between the two cities was also established. The group met in Perm and discussed how ordinary people can be involved in the daily governance of their lives. In 1998 senior officials from Perm visited Oxford for a seminar on "Safer Cities". As a result of the devaluation of the rouble in 1998, the Perm economy suffered another blow, so this programme for democracy became ever more important. Without support from friends who had been involved with the link for many years, and the Mayor of Perm and Consul General, the project could have collapsed.

During this period Perm set up its first nursery school for disabled children. A Perm police officer came to look at community policing; a Thames Valley Chief Superintendent and a probation officer went to Perm to examine their work with young offenders and drug addicts.

In 2000, Perm hosted their first ever voluntary sector conference for the Perm Region, at which visitors from Oxfordshire spoke on housing issues. In 2001 representatives of Oxfordshire County Council took part in an Environmental Conference in Perm, sponsored by the British Council, and the Oxfordshire Perm Voluntary Action Link Centre was opened. The purpose of the link centre was to support agencies in the Perm Region as they tried to establish new levels of voluntary activity, to meet social needs.

One of the most active links was (and is) between Sobell House (the Oxford Hospice) and the Perm Hospice movement. In 2002 medical staff specialising in palliative care visited Perm to train local nurses. In 2003 Rosalyn Roulston ran a workshop on bereavement counselling; she returned to Perm in 2004, and again in 2006 (with funding from the Victor Zorza Hospice Trust and Help the Hospices), to run seminars on wider aspects of bereavement for participants from all over Perm Region and beyond.

In 2008 a group of six from Perm City Council and a local community centre, Dom Druzhby (House of Friendship), came to look into how Oxford runs its community centres. The Perm visitors rated their visit as a great success and Perm set up community centres throughout the city.

Meanwhile our own Oxford Perm Association had been making use of its own funds raised through subscriptions and events. During the 1990s the Oxford Perm Association was able to give small but significant grants to people in need in Perm and Perm Region when life was very hard in Russia. With increasing prosperity in the 2000s, Perm City decided that it could afford to fund all crucial social needs, so our donations have been cut back. However, for two years we did give money to the Chusovoy schools in which the mainstream school ran projects for the local school for disabled children.

As Perm grew more prosperous and as City Councillors (especially Councillor Colin Cook) became more familiar with Perm, civic connections developed in a new way. There have been regular exchanges of councillors and specialists in both directions, to look at aspects of local governance, such as how best to integrate immigrants while encouraging diversity, how to deal with housing shortages, how to develop neighbourhood associations, how to run local government. In October 2015, the Mayor and Sheriff of Oxford, the leader of the City Council, Bob Price, and the deputy leader of Oxfordshire County Council, Liz Brighouse, (remembering her earlier years in Perm) spent some very active days in Perm forging more civic, educational and trade links. This has not been a one-way process. Although governing Oxford (population 150,000) and governing Perm (population one million) must be different, increasingly both sides are looking at 'how the other side manages this issue' with more seminars and joint projects in the offing.



photo: Liz Brighouse and Bob Price in Perm 2015

From about 2012, one of our members, Andrew Adams, had been trying to establish a journalists' link between the two cities. After a visit to Perm in 2015, he was able to co-operate with Vadim Skovorodin, Editor of *Business Class*, a much-respected Perm newspaper which covers much more than business. Between them they developed a range of Oxford and Perm articles

to be published in each other's media, *Business Class* and *The Oxford Times*. Despite difficulties at the Oxford end, this on-going project has become very active, not only with these articles, but with experiments on websites, and a seminar, in March 2019 held in Perm on 'Journalism and Ethics', attended by practicing journalists from both sides.

City Twinning and the OXFORD PERM ASSOCIATION

The seeds of city twinning were first sown in 1991. The Rector of Perm State University, Vladimir Malanin, was staying in Oxford with Cynthia Styles, who arranged a meeting at Oxford Town Hall with the then Lord Mayor, Queenie Hamilton, and the City Council Twinning Officer. Cynthia's suggestion of a twinning link could not be immediately effected, for lack of funds. However, official letters were exchanged between the Mayors of both cities, with the enthusiastic endorsement of the Rector.

In 1992 the City Council decided that they wished to establish a twinning link with a city in eastern Europe, and various possible twinings were considered. When May Wylie was appointed as the International Links Officer in June 1992, she was asked to make a definite proposal. In September 1992 a vote was taken in the OCC Public Accounts Committee to pursue a link with Perm. By the mid 1990s there were many people in Oxford with an interest in Perm, either because they had visited the city or because they had become involved in projects taking place in Oxford. Deb Manley proposed that we should set up a 'friendly association' - and the Oxford Perm Association was formally established in 1996. [To Oxfordians it is usually known as simply as the Perm Association.] This wide range of activities with a linked city and its region persuaded the leading officials of Perm Region Administration and Oxfordshire County Council to establish a twinning partnership - the first *regional* twinning in either country. Soon the two cities followed by setting up

their own partnership agreement in 1995, followed by formal twinning in 2001. A group of city councillors from Perm visited Oxford from 4th to 12th July 2005, to shadow the work of their Oxford city counterparts and to mark the tenth anniversary of friendship links between the two cities. Their visit included the unveiling of the new sign at Thornhill listing all the twin cities, including Perm, and similar signs were installed at other city boundaries.



photo: Official unveiling of twinning sign with addition of Perm, 2005

Perm City Administration was actively involved from the beginning of the twinning. Tatiana Grigorieva, the city's long-serving International Officer, has overseen events in Perm and frequently visits Oxford to meet her counterparts here. In Perm, a Perm-Oxford 'not-for-profit partnership' twinning link was set up by Galina Gusarova and other enthusiasts in December 2004, with the offering of a range of programmes: Arts and Culture, Community Initiatives, Disability Advocacy and Awareness, Education, Youth Involvement, Environment, Healthcare, Women in Leadership and Sports. [You can read its reports in our more recent Newsletters.]

In 2008 an 'Oxford Tree' was planted in Perm in the presence of the British Consul and the Mayor of Perm to recognize the twinning link.



photo: Planting of the 'Oxford Tree' in Perm during Jubilee Celebrations, 2008

May Wylie retired as International Officer for Oxford City Council in 2010. For some years the rearrangements for this post were uncertain, but by 2015 a satisfactory solution had been found. Oxford International Links was given significant responsibilities for distributing council funds to the various twinning links, and a part-time city International Officer was appointed.

Apart from the working visits between Oxford City Council and Perm City Council, described in the previous section, we must note the official attendance of representatives from Oxford at the 70th anniversary Victory Day celebrations in Perm in May 2015. The British government declined an invitation to the ceremony in Moscow, but in Perm, Councillor Colin Cook, Executive Director for Community Services, Tim Sadler, and two other

members of the Oxford Perm Association attended the dignified and moving ceremony.



photo: 'Immortal Regiment' march, Perm 2015

Cultural links

The city twinning was vigorously promoted under the leadership of the City Council's International Officer May Wylie, whose cultural exchanges were especially creative and ambitious. The first cultural exchange between youth groups from Oxford and Perm took place in 2000, when 16 students from the Perm Youth Ballet took part in a multi-national production of Noye's Fludde, under the musical direction of John Lubbock. Dancers from the Doyle Academy of Irish Dance took part in a reciprocal visit to Perm, for a Youth Folk Dance Festival in 2001 and dancers from Perm Youth Ballet returned to Oxford, also in 2001, for a performance in Oxford Town Hall.

The Yarmarka folk dance group came to Oxford for a Folk Dance Festival in 2002 and made a further visit in 2004. Ten students from Cheney School took part in a Youth Art Competition in Perm in 2002; Perm Youth Theatre visited Oxford in 2003 to take part in an International Performing Arts Festival; and Oxford Youth Dance visited Perm in 2004. Also in 2004, a team of young floor gymnasts from Perm took part in the International Youth Sports Festival, performing a lively mixture of gymnastics and ballet.



photo: Yarmarka dance group, Oxford 2004

In 2005 two groups of dancers from Perm took part in a production of Leonard Bernstein's Mass, with performers from all of Oxford's European twin cities. In 2006, the Carte Blanche student theatre from Oxford went to Perm to take part in an International Youth Drama Festival; a group of youngsters from the Doyle Academy of Irish Dance again visited Perm; and the folk dance group Yarmarka made a welcome return visit to Oxford. The highlight of 2007 was the participation of members of the Perm Youth Dance Company, working alongside young Oxford dancers, in a performance of Carmina Burana.



photo: Karavai balalaika quartet, Oxford 2010

The Karavai virtuoso balalaika quartet visited Oxford to participate in a band festival in 2008 - and returned in 2009 to take part in the Dorchester Abbey Festival, with another visit in 2011.

In 2009 dancers from Perm were again in Oxford for a multinational performance of Carmen. And Varvara Kalpidi brought over a small team from Perm to make a film about Oxford. In 2011 a group of young actors from the Pegasus Theatre collaborated in performances at a multinational youth drama camp in Perm.



photo: Pegasus players in Perm 2011

For a few notable years Perm celebrated its 'White Nights' and 'Twin-City Festivals' with great cultural aplomb. Oxford sent ceramic artists Diana Bell and Marie Darkins, photographer, Simon Murison-Bowie, and George Haslam, saxophonists to take part in these events – and Perm ceramic artists came to Oxford.



photo: Perm ceramics exhibition, Oxford



photo: George Haslam playing saxophone in Perm

Youth dancing groups continued to visit Oxford for its biennial dance festival. 2015 was the twentieth year of the twinning link between Perm City and Oxford City. In Oxford it was celebrated by special events throughout the year including displays and concerts by Yarmarka, the Perm folk dancing and music group, who had first come in 2002, and a week's visit from Karavai, the much-loved Balalaika quartet. OIL (Oxford International Links) was very helpful in funding support for our diverse and well-attended activities.

In 2017 we moved into sport. Seventeen members of East Oxford United Oxford Football Club with six adults spent two weeks at the Olympic Reserve International Youth Camp in the countryside outside Perm. They played games in different towns of the region and saw many aspects of local life. They had been funded by the combined efforts of the club, the City Council, OIL, the Oxford Perm Association, various colleges, various religious and other voluntary groups and Oxford Bus Company. Truly a wide-ranging civic effort from Oxford which turned out to be hugely successful. So in 2018 Oxford organized a Football Tournament for its twin cities, including, of course, Perm, with the boys living at Hill End Camp in glorious weather.



photo: East Oxford United Football Club boys visit to summer camp, Perm 2017

Conclusion

Oxford University and Perm State University were pioneers, swiftly followed by civic activists and by the twinning of Oxfordshire with Perm Region and Oxford City with Perm City. Theatre and dance groups, environmental research groups and university exchanges have been some of the outcomes. Celebrations and ceremonies have also played their historical and colourful part. But what has kept the twinning alive is the fact that it involves so many institutions and so many focused, practical schemes. Out of these schemes have come hundreds of friendships which feed back again into new schemes for the joint enrichment of our two cities and their surrounding regions.

Membership of the Oxford Perm Association has exceeded one hundred and fifty for several years. The Annual General Meetings are well attended and the Association organizes regular talks on Perm and on Russia. The autumn group visits from Oxford to Perm and of Perm State University teachers to Oxford are focal points of each year. Our newsletter is published three times each year (in hard-copy and electronic formats) and puts many of us in touch with all that is going on. Moreover, this website is kept up to date and now contains copies of all newsletters from June 2001 to the present with an on-line index of each issue. We hope you have enjoyed reading this account.

Oxford Perm Association

Richard Sills, David Roulston, October 2013

updated David Roulston, June 2016; Karen Hewitt, July 2019

You are reading this account of connections between Oxford and Perm on the Oxford Perm Association website. Since 2012 the association has a website, originally made by David Roulston, with a new version made by Jessica Vlasova in 2018 which is regularly updated.

We will endeavour to update this history at regular intervals. If you would like to make suggestions or corrections, please contact jessica.vlasova@gmail.com