

# PERM NEWS

The newsletter of the Perm Association

June 2007

## The Perm Disabled Society

The Perm Disabled Society was our first contact with a Perm voluntary association. For several years in the 1990s members of the Society came to Oxford, mostly through projects organised by Liz Brighthouse. Recently our contacts have lapsed as our attention has turned to the Hospice and homeless children. Now their members are eager to reinvigorate the Perm-Oxford Link.



People with all kinds of disabilities join the society. Across Perm Region there are 35 Associations of Disabled People, with about 21,000 members. Of these about 7000 live in Perm City. Their Centre is an important focus for information, support and, if they wish, communal activities. The premises of the Perm City Society are central and convenient: they have several rooms on the ground floor, and a similar number on the first floor with an invalid lift which takes a wheel-chair. The lift was installed recently and Vera Shishkina, the Chairman, who uses a wheelchair, promptly installed her office upstairs. Vera is a formidable woman who is well known to the city authorities; she argues consistently and powerfully for the rights of the disabled, and, by persisting, she usually gets her own way. The city has contributed to their Centre and supports, more-or-less willingly, many of their activities. However, this year the Regional Administration bought only 14 wheelchairs for the whole of the Region (with a population of two million). Disabled people in the villages have often never seen a

wheelchair in their life.

Living in a culture which tries to ignore the disabled by shutting them away out of sight, the Disabled Society encourages its members to live normal integrated lives as far as possible. The situation is definitely improving. More ramps can be seen in public buildings; some ordinary schools have been adapted for those who cannot walk or cannot see properly; ingenious uses have been made of computers to help young men and women who would previously have stayed at home to earn their living.

In the Region there are now twenty-five choirs of disabled people from the towns and the villages who run competitions among themselves and enter inter-regional competitions. I am not sure why people with different disabilities should band together for formal singing, but the choirs are extremely popular. Each choir appears in stunning outfits which they make themselves.

They run summer camps for young disabled people. Volunteers come to help, but the ethos is very much 'Get on and do it.' They organise family groups, acting and craft groups, general morale-boosting groups, and they go on trips together. The Perm Association in Oxford recently gave some money to their 'patchwork club' where the older women, some of them very frail and sick, are taught to do patchwork. I saw an impressive exhibition of their work (see page 1), much of which will be sold to swell the club funds.

What impressed me most was the thoroughly professional newspaper which they publish. Edited by Galina Dubnikova, it is a varied, packed, enjoyable paper, campaigning and funny at the same time. It regularly wins national prizes as the best paper in the 'special causes' group.

The Perm City society is run mostly by women – shrewd, intelligent and witty women with whom I spent a very enjoyable morning. We drank coffee, discussed ways of bringing the local administration to account, argued about the advantages and disadvantages of integrated school education, and reflected on a changing culture in Russia that comes only a few decades after major changes in our own. I took with me £500 from the Perm Association as a contribution towards buying wheelchairs for people in the small towns and villages where they are so urgently needed.

**A Request:** Vera, Galina and their friends want to re-establish contact with Oxford people – either people with disabilities, or other Oxford citizens with whom it would be fun to communicate – by email, for instance. Knowing Russian is useful but not necessary.

If you have any thoughts on the matter, do let us know.

*Karen Hewitt*

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### **'Black Earth City : A year in the heart of Russia'**

by Charlotte Hobson. pub Granta 2001

As part of her Edinburgh University Russian course Charlotte Hobson spent a year in the University of Voronezh. (She admits to choosing Voronezh over Moscow, partly to escape some sloaney fellow students who wanted to turn it into one long party !) But it wasn't just any year. It happened to be 1991 – the year of the coup against Gorbachev, the Yeltsin intervention and the end of the Soviet Union, and all the old certainties that – for good or bad - went with Soviet Communism.

Charlotte Hobson skilfully combines witty, wistful, comic and sometimes tragic anecdotes about daily life in the university hostel where she stayed (with cockroaches and quantities of vodka, cigarettes and other smokes); and her colourful fellow students and their families, with some telling insights into the impact that the end of communism was having. She gives handy tips on coping with hyperinflation: basically spend as much as possible as fast as possible, and don't expect your employer to pay you.

She has an affectionate but cool eye; and describes without comment both the depths of brutality to which army bullying could go, and the heights of warmth and friendship that she met in the families she got to know. The array of exuberant aunts at the wedding is memorable. She describes the corruption and bureaucracy. The smelly fate of the camembert held for 6 weeks in the post office is one telling anecdote. Her account of her affair with a fellow student, and the difficulty that they and others like them had in finding any privacy is touching without being mawkish. Her piece on learning Russian with its gloriously complex grammar will strike a chord with those like me who are trying to grapple with it. Attending the long Russian Orthodox Easter service is movingly told. The visit to Memorial Wood – recently revealed site of a Stalinist NKVD mass murder - is chilling.

For me, perhaps the most telling and moving part is the description of the 1991/92 New Year celebration, when the old Soviet Union died and the Russian Federation was born; because I think that some of the same ambivalence still lingers on. It has some of the same atmosphere of the brilliantly touching German movie "Goodbye Lenin" about the fall of the Berlin Wall – if you've

not seen I'd urge you to go and buy the DVD. I don't think I can do better than quote Charlotte Hobson directly when the Red Flag Hammer and Sickle is being lowered for the last time: "*We cheered, and then a pang of nostalgia silenced everyone. The imagery of their childhood was being laid aside and the socialist ideals that had been taught along with it were now obsolete. For children of the Brezhnev years, the real and the ideal were plainly delineated: no one felt any sadness at the end of Party hegemony. The ideals, though, were different. It was as though the government had suddenly announced that love did not conquer all*".

I find that not only touching, but also expressing beautifully the ambivalence that many in the west as well as in the old Communist bloc still feel.

A Google search for Charlotte Hobson revealed her love for Gogol; that she has translated Turgenev's *Virgin Soil*, and that she is busy writing something. I for one will certainly keep an eye open for that; but meanwhile would encourage you to go and buy and enjoy 'Black Earth City'! It got very good reviews when it came out in 2001<sup>1</sup> and won a Somerset Maugham Award.

Geoffrey Findlay . Ramsbury, Wiltshire. May 2007

<sup>1</sup> Michael Frayn : "Dazzling ..one of the best travel books I've ever read". The Times: "Hobson's poignant tales...are told with something of the muted emotion that suffuses Chekhov's short stories". The Spectator: "...full of comedy, compassion and human understanding". William Dalrymple : "Witty and observant, sensitive and above all deeply sympathetic".

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## What's wrong with Putin?

In the last Newsletter I recounted some of the reasons why Putin is admired and appreciated by thoughtful Russian university teachers – who seem to be reflecting the views of millions in the country. Putin remains popular as he faces the last nine months of his eight-year stint as President. In their answers to my questions, the teachers also criticized him, less for what he has done than for what he has failed to do.

*He hasn't tackled corruption and he hasn't tackled poverty* said one respondent sweepingly.

Others agreed that poverty still exists, that people are suffering from the privatisation of municipal housing and that doctors are abominably paid in an underfunded health service. But these disasters happened under Yeltsin, so all one can say about Putin is that, starting from a hopeless case, he has failed to make it much better. And even so, he *has* made it better. Oil money has raised the general economic level; most people are better off, and even poor people are less poor than they were.

The increased wealth of the country may (or may not) have affected the level of corruption. One teacher said bitterly: *There have been lots of proceedings concerning corruption among teachers and other high school officials. If you want to fight corruption you should not only fight those who get bribes but those who give them as well. In Russia they assume that most teachers and doctors take bribes (just because how else*

*can they survive?!*) She goes on to tell of students who have tried to bribe her, and who are quite untroubled by her angry rejection of their offers. What is this to do with Putin? It's a matter of culture: he should tackle not just the oligarchs but day-to-day corruption in all areas of public life.

In the last two or three years he has brought in new National Projects in areas like Health, Education and Agriculture. Millions of roubles have been directed into education and so on through a variety of schemes and awards. *Now the national projects concerning health service and education are being introduced as an afterthought to save the situation but they are not thoroughly thought through and too much time was wasted imitating action, aping some western projects which couldn't be realized due to specific Russian conditions.* In discussions which may sound familiar, several teachers said that this useful money was being mismanaged, not through villainy but through a failure to work out priorities.

*What we both are strongly against is the government policy in the field of science and education. It's a disaster. It has been conducted in this way for more than a decade now, and there is no visible result or end, only new losses. True, it's hard to blame the President personally, but the ministers are coming and leaving and he remains.*

Or the policies are premature: *Before making such experiments, one should make sure that the existing system stands well on*

*its feet, which is not the case (low salaries, lack of funding, lack of young teachers). You can't make a hungry man join a fitness club.*

The issues that worry Westerners - censorship of the Press, increasing authoritarianism and Putin's dangerous power over other states because of Russia's oil - were not major concerns for these teachers. Three or four of the respondents complained: *It is Mass Media that tries to create the positive image of him and they achieve it perfectly because ordinary people take it for granted and blindly believe him. But he doesn't improve the situation in the country radically. More than that he and his government have eradicated all constructive criticism on TV and the Newspapers.* But even this teacher felt that the problem was Putin's 'negligence', nothing more sinister or oppressive. Others insisted that they could read many versions of what was happening in Russia on the internet; they could (and they do) get foreign television programmes

by satellite; and in any case there were still national newspapers which were regularly critical of the President. Maybe there was greater censorship than under Yeltsin, but there was much less killing.

*To my mind most of the things he has done are rather far away from the democratic and liberal political points of view* says a sociology teacher – and then remarks that nonetheless, his struggles to reform and use institutions set up for other purposes have made her own research into the institutionalization of government so much more interesting!

So, on the surface, the criticisms tend to be of the 'Has not tried hard enough' variety. However, underlying the discussion of his achievements and his failings is another discussion about the *role* of the President – a discussion which might cause us to reflect on our own political situation. I will continue the article in the next newsletter.

*Karen Hewitt*

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### **The AGM of the Perm Association**

Wolfson College Buttery was once again the warm and convenient venue for this event on Wednesday, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2007 and the evening started well with food provided by the Committee and wine from the College cellars. The meeting was relatively well attended (about 30 out of a membership of around 80). A reshuffle of officers was anticipated so all the committee members resigned. The new officers are as follows:

Chairman:	Mari Prichard
Secretary:	Rosalyn Roulston
Treasurer:	David Roulston
Membership Secretary:	Cynthia Styles

The following people remain in post:

Richard Sills:	Newsletter Editor:
Ann Davis:	Events Co-ordinator
Robin Carr:	Liaison with Oxford International Links

Committee members:

Ken Cugnoni  
Kay Harris (newly elected)

In addition, it was agreed that Karen Hewitt should hold a new position as the Perm Liaison Officer. Her long and very strong personal links with Perm and the Association will continue to be a great asset to the Committee - we could not let her go!

It was agreed during the meeting that we should consider having more Russian-related events during the year - so watch this space!

After more refreshments, Peter Oppenheimer gave a talk. He is a fluent Russian speaker and qualified interpreter (having studied the language on National Service along with Michael Frayn, Alan Bennet and Dennis Potter) and he studied Russia's post-communist economy during his career as an Oxford economist. He is now President of the Centre for Hebrew and Jewish studies at Yarnton, but continues to keep up with Russian affairs. His talk on the historical relationship between Russia and Britain and the Russian psyche and way of life, was very interesting. We are delighted that he agreed to come back to a meeting of the Perm Association in the future and keep us up to date with developments in Russia as he sees them.

*Rosalyn Roulston*

## Dates for your diary

### **June 27 – Putin - Saviour or Monster? Russian Views**

A seminar presented by Karen Hewitt, based on responses by Russian teachers to a recent survey of their views about Putin's Russia. Begins at 6.30pm at 6 Rawlinson Road, Oxford. Drinks and nibbles will be provided. Parking is normally possible on Rawlinson Road

### **July 1 – Pasternak Trust**

Not a Perm Association event; but members ought to know that on the first Sunday of every month, pictures by Leonid Pasternak, the Russian impressionist painter and father of Boris, are on display from 2.00pm to 4.00pm at the Pasternak family home at 20 Park Town, Oxford. Viewing by arrangement with the family, on telephone 01865 515994.

### **July 13 – Social Event**

See item under " Oxford International Links ".

### **August - Carmina Burana**

See item under " Oxford International Links ".

### **September – University Exchange**

The annual exchange visit to Perm will take place from 8 to 23 September 2007. This year is fully booked, but if you would like to go to Perm, contact Karen Hewitt for details of the visit in September 2008. All are warmly invited to apply – you do not need to be a member of the university! Details from Karen Hewitt.

### **October 16 – "Palmyra of the North"**

An illustrated talk by Richard Sills on the building of St Petersburg in the 18th century. 7.30pm at Wolfson College, Linton Road. There are plenty of parking spaces.

### **November 14 - University Exchange**

We welcome teachers from Perm on the return leg of the university exchange. There will be a party to welcome them, probably on Wednesday 14th November, and members are welcome to invite them out in the evening or at weekends.

### **Russian classes**

OU DCE is offering Russian classes at Ewert House. Stage 1, run by Ludmilla Checkley and Russian Lower Intermediate Conversation, run by Kira, have been running this year. They hope to have a Stage 2 class in the autumn as well.

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## **Oxford International Links News**

In February 2007, OIL held a "Victorian Evening – see page 7 for an account.

### **Social Event**

OIL is running a "Pre Bastille Night" social event at The Ferry Centre, Summertown, at 7.30pm on Friday 13 July. Tickets (£8 waged, £5 unwaged), to include supper, from May Wylie.

### **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. Anyone wishing to sing in the chorus should contact Mel Houldershaw

## News of other links

### Bonn

A group from Bonn visited Oxford in May 2007, to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the link and attend the unveiling of a commemorative stained glass window in Oxford Town Hall. (At the jubilee celebrations in Bonn in October 2007, a twin window will be unveiled in Bonn City Hall.) The unveiling was followed by a civic service at the Church of St Michael in the Northgate and a civic reception in the Town Hall.

Celebrations continued the following weekend, with a Burgerfest in the Oxford Castle complex, a Jubilee Concert in the Town Hall, with choirs from Oxford and Bonn performing the Mozart Requiem, and a Barn Dance at Cheney School.

### Grenoble

Folk groups from Grenoble took part in the Oxford Folk Festival in March.  
The East Oxford Community Choir performed in Grenoble in April.

### Leiden

A group from Oxford visited Leiden in May for the annual Remembrance Day ceremony.

### Leon

A collection at the annual Misa Campesina (Nicaraguan Peasant Mass) raised £300 towards good causes in Leon.

The Leon Association now has a new chairman – Tom Pegram.

### **Note from Membership Secretary**

Membership subscriptions for 2007 were due on 1<sup>st</sup> 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,  
1 Carey Close  
Oxford  
OX2 8HX

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.

Cynthia Styles  
Tel: 01865 554137  
email: [cynthia.styles@plant-sciences.oxford.ac.uk](mailto:cynthia.styles@plant-sciences.oxford.ac.uk)

## Obituary

We were saddened to learn of the untimely death last November of David Steel. Although not a member of the Perm Association, he played a significant role in one of our exchanges. In 2001, Valentina Vereshchagina and her husband Anatoly visited Oxford as part of the "Allotments and Dachas" exchange. David gave them a guided tour of various Oxford allotments, and proved to be a mine of information about the fascinating history and organisation of English allotments. Having an Oxford doctorate in Botany, he was well able to discuss horticultural issues with our Russian guests, and they much appreciated his contribution to their visit.

## *A Victorian Evening*

*On 16<sup>th</sup> February 2007, Nobles, Ladies, Gentlemen and other Oxfordshire folk - all supporters of Oxford International Links (OIL) - were welcomed to the grand 1<sup>st</sup> floor suite in Oxford Town Hall. Her Imperial Majesty sent the regrets of herself and Albert due to a previous engagement.*

*Guests in fine dress were welcomed and serenaded with melodies past and present by a very versatile quintet. The evening entertainment included operatic arias with accompaniment, viola solo, brass ensemble, songs from the shires, fine oratory from the Leiden Grumpies and a remarkable display of can-can dancing that had many a gentleman loosening his collar.*

*The tables groaned with a surfeit of victuals and the cellar retainers reported sales of fine wines. The highlight of the evening was a raffle conducted by the master of ceremonies, when many valued prizes were eagerly contested by the gambling fraternity.*

*The evening concluded on a note of warning. The master of ceremonies recounted the moral tale of a young maiden trapped in a horseless carriage by her suitor in country lane by the hamlet of Bampton. Guests, suitably chastened, awaited the arrival of carriages as the town crier called "all's well" at two hours before midnight. This entertaining evening raised over 950 guineas for OIL funds. God save the Queen!*

*Ann Davis*

### **Perm Association contact details**

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Newsletter:	Richard Sills;	tel. 01865 721644;	e-mail: richardsills@btinternet.com
Events:	May Wylie;	tel. 01865 252537;	e-mail: mwylie@oxford.gov.uk

## **A Permian Botanist in Oxford**

*Larissa Novoselova first came to Oxford as one of the 'Perm Teachers Group in 1992. Now she is a Professor of Botany and returned in May 2007 to spend a month on research here.*

For 15 years my English photos have been favourite photos of my family. They were the first colour photos in my life. My children (Elena, Natalya and Victor) told to friends with pride: "This is my mother in Oxford University; this is my mother at the Hyde park." A photo "Model of Structure of leaf" from the Natural History Museum I have used in my studies until now. I remember relations with Brian Styles and colleagues from The Plant Science Department in November 1992. when I was doing research on reproductive biology of annual species of *Medicago* (onesuch and different species of *Lucerne*, alfalfa).

Fifteen years later, here I am in Oxford again and I am happy. I am in Great Britain at the best time for the botanist – the time of flowering, florescence, blossoming, blooming. The fantastic time. I have seen beautiful gardens. The Oxford Botanic Garden. The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Hampton Court Palace gardens. Blenheim Palace gardens.

In the Cedar vista, the Temperate House, the Palm House, the Rose Garden, the Davis Alpine House, the Queen's Garden, the Bamboo garden, the Grass garden are surprising combinations of history, science, garden art, landscape. In the wet tropics zone of the Princess of Wales Conservatory the Kew Royal botanic gardens, for the first time I saw the Titan Arum (*Amorphophallus titanum*). It's worth seeing! The inflorescence up to three metres in circumference. For the first time in my life I saw flowering tulip-trees, glorious flowering collection of rhododendrons (*Rhododendron Dell*).

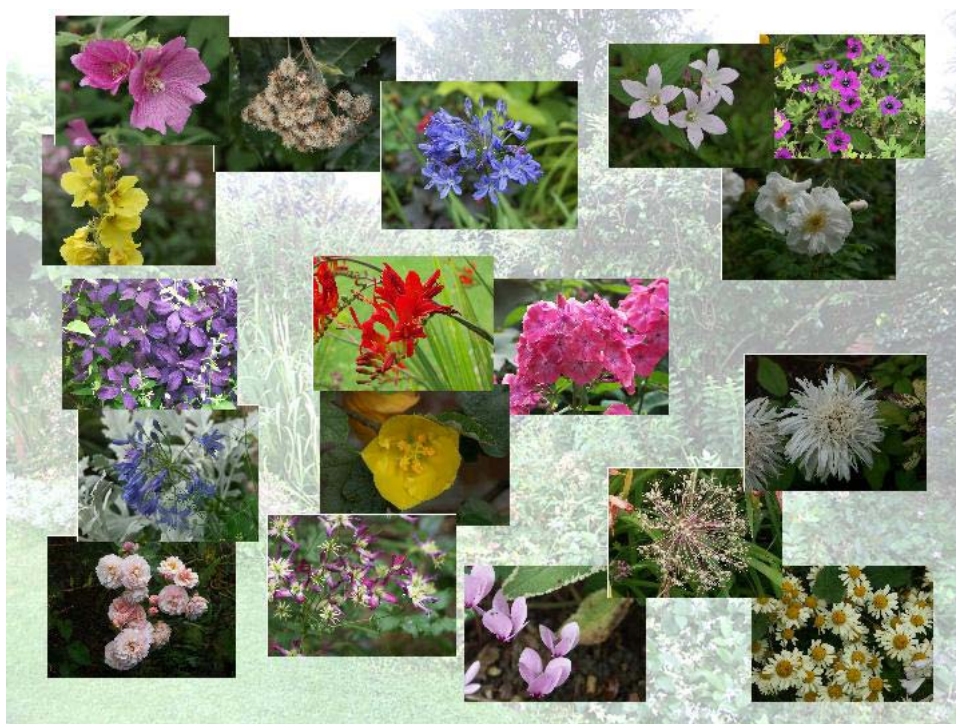
My English botanic angel Dr. Maria de Lourdes Rico-Arce lives in Kew now. She investigates species of legumes. I was present at her lecture where the importance of legumes was illustrated by tasting of Soya bean ice-cream!

In the British Natural History Museum I discovered my herbarium plant specimens (my present fifteen years ago) side by side with well-known specimens of Pallas's herbarium. In the Oxford Natural History Museum I saw and loved the exhibition of paintings of plants by Rosemary Wise which is fascinating for specialists and amateurs.

*Titan Arum (Amorphophallus titanum) at Kew*



My favourite streets in Oxford are Woodstock Road and Banbury Road, because all houses have their own (botanic) gardens. I like go for a walk and note all changes and development of plants. Great Britain is cloudland, dreamland country, country- greenhouse, where all people love and know of plants. In all gardens I saw a lot of families with children. I think that love and knowledge of plants are beginning like this.



*Larissa Novoselova*