

A wife's eye view

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IN April I attended the RCGP Spring meeting in Oxford with, or rather at a respectful pace or two behind, my husband. For some reason, Oxford is easy to reach by train from the North, difficult by road—exactly the opposite of Cambridge. A moral here no doubt, but it eludes me. From the River Tees we followed a devious route, attempting to avoid A1 and M1 roadworks, and ended up in Northampton going twice round the one-way system before we escaped—only to become entangled in diversions caused by a Large Load.

The booking form had already presented us with difficult choices: Blenheim or the Footlights, Christ Church or a hotel? Mindful of the possibility of bedrooms in historic colleges being separated from the bathroom by two staircases and a quad, we chose the Randolph Hotel. The other social outings and the academic programme presented an *embarras de richesses*.

What a crowd we were! One thousand in all, a murmuration of medical practitioners, a wonderment of wives, a handful of husbands, a froth of families.

Fire alarm at the Randolph

Outnumbered by Japanese and Americans, we dined in the Randolph surrounded by Osbert Lancaster's cheerful Zuleika Dobson paintings. We were all of us 'summoned by bells'—the fire alarm—at 5.30 am on Friday. We dutifully gathered outside in the cold and the rain, in interesting stages of undress; three fire-engines but no visible fire. Rumours variously blamed cigarette smokers, joss-stick burners, a fire in the kitchen. Bleary-eyed, we answered a roll-call, and trooped back inside.

Oxford on Friday looked at its best in the sunshine, its honey-coloured sandstone set off by a blue sky and the trees showing a dusting of green. The traffic bustles by but inside the college quads the atmosphere seems unchanged through the centuries.

Blenheim in the evening was a joy; the bus negotiated three arches with only inches to spare. 'What foresight by the architect to make the arches just wide enough for buses!' I overheard. The Palace was awe-inspiring, its floodlit water-gardens magical. The wine flowed non-stop during supper. The people at our table were mainly Scottish, including my husband—the old clan instinct again. I asked why at this meeting, with Scots surely in an overall minority, we had such a plethora of Scottish speakers. They suggested either that there are so many Scottish doctors anyway (including exports), or they always rise to the top of the tree! My proffered theory that the Scots are natural bossy-boots was totally rejected.

A good time was had by all. Our bus was labelled Randolph. 'Oh, look!' said a wag, 'Randolph the red-nosed bus!'

The splendour of Christ Church

Saturday was even sunnier than Friday, and the buses buzzed around fetching and carrying. We non-doctors felt lucky to be off to Avebury and Littlecote, or touring Oxford in the sun. I kept looking for Jude's view of Oxford's dreaming spires and never quite found it (I seem to remember, though, that he was on top of a barn at the time).

After our bus tour, it was a mad dash to get all done up for dinner in the vast splendour of Christ Church, overlooked by portraits of Henry VIII, Elizabeth I and Wolsey. Witty speeches, good food and college scouts trying to ensure we all ended up under the table—they even left us the decanters of college port.

Sunday was wet but we were all inside listening to Professor John Walker's lively lecture, delivered with great verve and refreshing northern candour. A noisy, chatty lunch followed on from this, with old and new friends.

Then off home, overfed, underslept, buzzing with new ideas and impressions. The Thames Valley faculty did us all proud.