

9-20-97

Journey to Oxford

Long months ago, in a notice in the Grace and Holy Trinity Church newsletter, Sally Wood invited interested people to a preliminary meeting to plan a summer/1997 trip to Oxford, England. About twenty-five people attended that meeting, including Sally, Hill Brown, Rector of Grace and Holy Trinity, Jean Davenport from Creative Travel, several people who had gone on a similar trip some eight years earlier, two Episcopal priests, and assorted casually interested people, not all from the church. Some of them I knew; several I did not. I was there because almost any trip to England, especially to Oxford, had been a casual dream of Paul's and mine for a number of years. The whole venture sounded so far in the future that I couldn't believe it would ever happen.

Hill Brown told us that we could stay at Oriel College during the students' summer holiday and that he thought it would be an opportunity to get acquainted with Oxford and surrounding parts of England and, perhaps as well, to study some aspect of Anglicanism for two weeks. He introduced Jean Davenport, who put the services of her travel agency at our disposal, described a trip she had just completed through the Cotswolds, an easy day trip from Oxford, and provided us with maps of England and several brochures about possible day trips from Oxford. Several of those who had traveled to Oxford on the previous trip told a little about their experiences, all of it positive and interesting. Sally proposed that we discuss what each of us would like to accomplish on such a trip. The discussion was general, but the early consensus seemed to prefer casual travel to formal study, although some would welcome the opportunity to sit in on a class. Two or three hoped that there might be organized trips out of Oxford. Everyone seemed pleased with the prospect of such a trip.



Grace and Holy Trinity, Richmond

The next meeting several weeks later attracted a somewhat different audience; all of those who had been on the previous trip had dropped out, but others joined us. Anna and Claire, our visitors from England, attended that meeting and answered some of our questions about what kind of weather we could expect and about various modes of transportation available. A number of meetings took place over the next year with an ever-changing number of participants: Sally dropped out, following her marriage, and several new people joined the discussion. By the end of 1996, several of us made a commitment in the form of a small deposit for our lodging at Oriel College. The trip

began to look as though it might actually happen. As 1997 progressed, we began to look like a committed group, settling on our dates, from July 31 to August 14, and making our plane reservations on British Airways.

I found the excitement building as we made additional plans, including three day-trips from Oxford to Stratford-on-Avon, Bath, and Salisbury. Paul and I decided to return to Richmond on August 14, while others elected to remain three days more in order to spend more time in London. Two planned to leave Oxford for a three-day trip to Paris.

The trip took on a feeling of reality when Paul and I got out our passports and luggage and began the actual packing process. Because we were the only ones returning on the fourteenth, we had to make our own arrangements for travel from Dulles to Richmond. Mary Lietman offered to pick us up in Washington on her return from visiting her new great-nephew and -niece in Baltimore. She also took us to meet our Groome bus which the group had chartered to take us from Richmond to Dulles on the thirty-first.

So, on a warm afternoon on July 31, a small group met at the bus pickup point to begin our trip. Many introductions were necessary, for none of us was acquainted with all of the group, despite the planning meetings we had attended. Several of the original seventeen had had to drop out for various reasons, leaving us with eleven to begin our journey. On the small bus bound for Washington, we had general conversation about some of the places we would visit on our side trips. We began to learn that two of our group had traveled more than the rest. Brantley Knowles, industriously working at some petit point, had made several trips to England on her antique business and was able to correct the pronunciation of Castle Combe and explain that it was a small, picturesque village with no castle in sight. Marshall Pearman turned out to be knowledgeable about European travel in general, and a number of us gratefully followed him through the intricacies of boarding our plane at Dulles. Because we arrived in a group to get our seat assignments, we were all seated in the same cabin on the 747, although only pairs were actually seated together. But at least we began to recognize the individual members of our group: Brantley, her husband Peter, and their teenaged sons Bolling and Peter; Don Hartford and Nora Howell; Marshall, now solo since his companion had dropped out because of health; Nancy Kellam and Anne Manson; Paul and I.

After an overnight, largely sleepless flight, we flocked together during an easy passage through customs at Heathrow Airport and, following a travel agent who held a card for our Grace and Holy Trinity group, boarded our mini-bus for Oxford. Once we gathered for breakfast in the Hall at Oriel College, tired as we all were, we began getting acquainted. We already had learned that Marshall was a retired Chesterfield County history teacher doing volunteer work in the Chesterfield Museum, that Anne is the Rector at Church of the Creator Episcopal Church in Mechanicsville, and that the Knowles' sons are students at St. Christopher's School and were exceptionally delightful teenagers, but the process of sharing our experiences in Oxford and of becoming a cohesive group interested in each other began slowly.

The rest of that first day in Oxford will probably always remain somewhat foggy in my mind. On our second day, four of us attended Evensong at Christ Church Cathedral. We were beginning to conquer our jet lag and to take great pleasure in what we were doing. As we wandered through the streets looking for a place to have dinner, we gradually added to the original group of four and ended with a party of ten at the Mitre Restaurant in "downtown" Oxford, two blocks from Oriel, for dinner. While we were having drinks at the bar waiting for our table, Marshall happened by, making the group complete. He was already eating there. As we compared dishes and chatted during the dinner, I mentioned my interest in making a list of English signs. We heard about what each had done during the day, varying from Paul's and my tour of Oxford on the top of a double-decker bus to Brantley's and Peter's enthusiasm about the Ashmolean Museum, as well as the Knowles family's project of eating in the various pubs they had already found. In the bar, Marshall had told us about his visit to the Bodleian Library as well as a couple of pubs he had found.



Getting acquainted among ourselves continued each morning as we gathered for the hearty English breakfast, although occasionally an individual or two opted for sleep instead of food. Anne, Nancy, and Marshall could tell us about their train trip to London, Brantley had visited some antique shops, Peter was enthusiastic about the Saxon Tower, and while we exchanged information about our investigations of such places as the Covered Market, Brown's restaurant, the Carfax Tower, as well as Paul's and my pursuit of the walking tour of all the Oxford colleges, we also began to feel more and more comfortable with each other in various combinations. Marshall had cancelled his scheduled trip to Paris and, after a few days left us for his solo visit to Scotland; Nancy, who had begun by going along with various people for ideas and companionship, began her remarkable solo exploration of such places as Windsor Palace, Southampton, Cambridge, and York; the Knowles continued their investigation of Oxford pubs; Anne, Paul, and I attended a Mozart concert at the handsome Sheldonian Theatre; and various

combinations of us met sometimes accidentally and sometimes by plan for meals. We had the three planned trips to Stratford, Bath, and Salisbury. At Garrick's Pub in Stratford, we celebrated Paul's birthday. We all got thoroughly soaked in a driving rain in Bath, where Marshall was exultant about having a steak and kidney pie for lunch and Paul and I lunched at Sally Lunn's House. All of us delighted in the Salisbury Cathedral. Some of the others joined a nighttime Ghost Tour in the Cotswolds vicinity, as well as a day-trip to Blenheim Palace. We missed Marshall after he left for Scotland; by the time August 14 arrived and the group broke up, with Anne, Paul and me returning to the U.S., the Knowles going to London to visit family and see the city, Nora, Don, and Nancy staying on at Oriel, we found that, in less than two weeks, we had become a close group.

Back in Richmond, our group got together to visit Anne's church the last Sunday in August, really happy to see each other again and to discover what each had done since we had last been together. Another time, we gathered at the Knowles' for a luncheon reunion and exchange of photographs. As members of what began as a disparate group of strangers, we now feel an extraordinary closeness. We all intend to continue renewing our association.

8-30-97

Oxford - Day One

After an overnight flight on a British Airways 747, we landed at Heathrow Airport on August 1 at 6:30 a.m. We should have been rested, for our plane had left Dulles Airport at 4:30 the previous afternoon. Consider, however, that the time difference was five hours. We landed, then, at 1:30 "real" time. Where did the night go? I, for one, hadn't slept a minute of the time, being too occupied with various meals and snacks, including breakfast, watching *Evita* on the large screen at the front of our cabin, and squeezing from my cramped seat onto the narrow aisle to stand in line for "rest" intervals.

Excitement over actually being in England took over and, combined with the crisp, slightly rainy, cool weather, I felt refreshed and ready to go, as did the rest of our party, more or less. Going through customs was no problem. By the time we had collected our luggage and gathered around the chartered bus representative bearing a large "Grace and Holy Trinity" sign, rush hour in the London area was in full swing. We boarded our mini-bus, all eleven of us, and set out for Oxford. The bus driver said that he was taking the scenic route in deference to the clogged motorways from Heathrow to Oxford. I was able almost immediately to start the list I had planned of English signs that state things their way instead of ours.

In the Heathrow terminal, we'd already become acquainted with warnings to "Mind Your Step" and "Way Out" guiding us through the various exits. A bit of observation helped us interpret "Dual Carriageway" as a two-way road when we left the divided highway. We're still not sure what "Gap Closed Ahead" means, but our very able bus driver seemed to know. He was able to interpret the non-verbal signs guiding him around the "roundabouts" which occurred at all road intersections. (Three hash-marks, followed by two, and ending in one hash-mark just before the entry into the roundabout.) We did see

that about a hundred yards before each roundabout entry, a sign proclaimed "Start Stopping Now." When we ran over them, I realized the meaning of the sign "Humps for 800 Yards." I'm still mystified by a sign pointing to the left and announcing "Wallingford 1-1/4 Miles, Except for Loading."

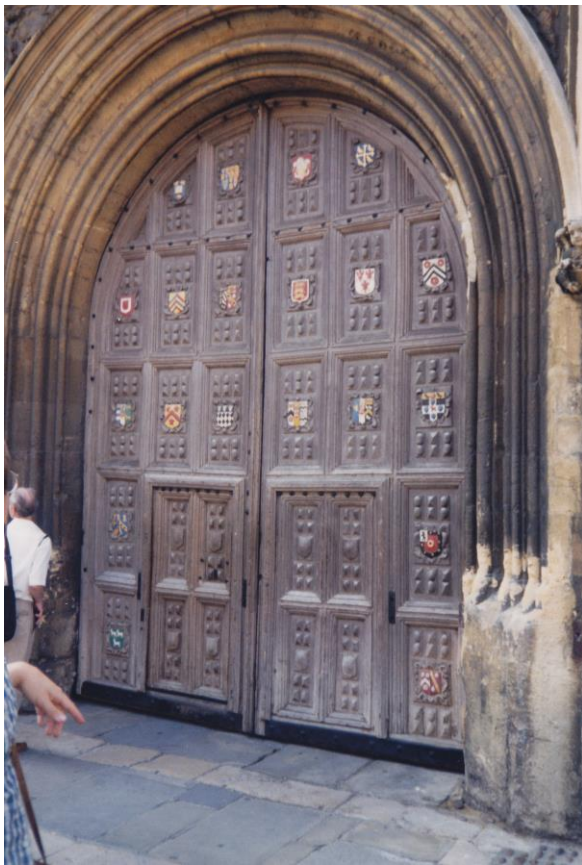


The scenic way was indeed scenic, as we made our way down mere lanes defined by dense hedgerows, many in yellow or white bloom. (Just like the descriptions in English novels I'd read!) The road was narrow enough that oncoming cars proceeded very carefully when we met. There was clearance, but just barely. On subsequent trips we traveled on even more narrow roads where there were occasional turn-outs to prevent accidents when cars met. I was happy on this leg of our journey that the hedgerows were broken often enough for me to glimpse idyllic scenes of sheep grazing in fields divided by dry stone walls, with occasional groups of charming cottages with colorful gardens in their minute front yards, all very close to the road. In one neat village where I glimpsed people walking or bicycling to work, I saw one large sign on a storefront, "BOARDING CATTERY." Our driver pointed out Windsor Palace in the distance, as well as roadside cottages belonging to Ian Fleming and John Masefield. As a matter of fact, during the hour and a half ride to Oxford on a series of roads which had me bewildered about just what direction we were headed, I was able to glimpse samples of many of the sights I was to see more closely in the days to come.

The passage through Oxford itself, with its narrow streets, massive grey stone walls, and imposing buildings with soaring towers, was a wonderful introduction to the city in which we were to spend our next two weeks. I caught tantalizing views of gates opening onto beautifully green yards surrounded by beautiful old stone buildings, some of which I was later to identify as Exeter College, Merton College, and Christ Church College.

Just beyond Christ Church College we arrived at Oriel College, our temporary home. The Manciple, Mrs. Thompson, greeted us, provided two strong young men to help us get our luggage to our rooms, and invited us to come back for breakfast, as it was now somewhere around eight, their time. Even though it would be our second breakfast of the day, we all went, of course.

The entry to Oriel College was two massive wooden front doors, surmounted by colorfully painted crests. Into one of the large doors was cut an ordinary-sized door. We stepped over the raised sill into the main quadrangle of Oriel College. Ahead of us were two well groomed, large squares of green grass, with a sidewalk leading to the Hall where we had breakfast every morning. After going up several stone steps with decorative pots of bright red geraniums, we entered the anteroom to the Hall where all college meals were served. Oriel is a small college of some four hundred students during the academic year, but the Hall was impressive with its several long, heavy wooden tables centered with small lamps every few feet. At the end was a slightly raised platform with the high table where the Masters and Fellows dined. On both sides of the Hall we saw high stained-glass windows depicting many shields, including the crest of the college, as well as memorials to Oriel's famous sons, among others, Thomas More, Sir Walter Raleigh, John Henry Newman, Matthew Arnold, and Cecil Rhodes. In addition, a dozen or more large paintings pictured some of the past heads of the college, as well as more famous alumni. We had a table reserved for our group and were served the breakfast that was to be the beginning of every day: cereal, egg, thinly sliced local ham or sausages, some form of potato cake, a broiled tomato half, lots of toast, plus orange juice, coffee, and tea. I found that I liked the strong tea when I added an equal amount of milk.



We had a brief introduction to the history of Oriel College by Mrs. Thompson, who is very proud of her title of Manciple (financial officer), a word I had formerly encountered only in one of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. In fact, Oriel, founded in the thirteenth century, is very proud of housing a copy of the Canterbury Tales in its library. She gave us a brief tour of the grounds, starting in the main quadrangle and progressing through a second and third quadrangle, all centered with beautiful grass lawns. On the lawn in the third quad, we were invited to walk on the grass. Other lawns were off limits. In fact, later we saw croquet games as well as people sunning on that lawn.

From the third quad we could enter a tunnel under Oriel Street to another quadrangle where our rooms were located, no lawns here. During the day we had easier access to our rooms through a barred gate, on Oriel Street, which could be opened by our room keys. We were housed in an old building in the center of the O'Brien Quadrangle, in rooms on the first floor which had been "restructured" in 1993. I almost dropped out when I saw the long flight of stone steps to the first floor (our second floor here), but they proved to be easily ascended and descended. Our single rooms were surprisingly roomy and very comfortable, each with its own bathroom. And so, we settled into our lodging from which we daily launched ourselves in exploration of Oxford or on several day-trips to places of English historic interest.

9-12-97

English Signs

During our exploration of Oxford and other locations, we found added pleasure in expanding my list of signs. After members of our group discovered my list, they frequently mentioned interesting signs they had seen. I then looked for those signs as we continued our explorations.



Some of the best signs came on our coach trips out of Oxford. One was baffling; it said, "ONCOMING VEHICLES IN MIDDLE OF ROAD." On the road to Bath, I collected several, including one identifying the TIPSY MILLER FIRE HOUSE. There must have been a story there if we could have stopped to ask about it. The road sign stating "NOT SUITABLE FOR LONG LORRIES (i.e., trucks)," made sense, for the road was very narrow and had frequent turns. On those same narrow lanes, we speculated that

"DIVERSION" must signal a turnoff to enable cars to pass. We enjoyed several triangular road notices, like our yield signs, in Cotswold villages advising "ELDERLY CROSSING." One especially interesting sign outside a village stated, "SWIMMING POOL AND TOILETS," and a small inn had a sign announcing "ACCOMMODATION RECEPTION IN REAR." The entry to the "car park" of a very small inn declared in large letters "NO FOOTBALL COACHES ALLOWED." Having observed some American football coaches on television we were sympathetic; however, to make sense of that sign we had to translate "football" as "soccer" and "coaches" as "buses." It was a crowd of rowdy soccer fans the inn was hoping to avoid. A sign near Castle Combe, a beautiful small village, puzzled us with the words, "READY TOKEN." Then we came to a privately held bridge over the River Avon (one of seven so named in England). It required a toll, the only one we encountered on our entire visit.

In Bath itself, this notice was posted outside the Pump Room: "IT IS AN OFFENSE TO DRINK ALCOHOL IN THIS PUBLIC PLACE, IF WARNED BY A CONSTABLE NOT TO DO SO. PENALTY L 1"

On the other hand, at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford in a section displaying some of their original Rembrandt and Michelangelo drawings, a sign stated that "VISITORS ARE REQUIRED NOT TO STEP OVER THE BLACK LINE ON THE FLOOR." Nearby at an elevator, we found "THIS RECENTLY ACQUIRED LIFT DOES NOT OPERATE TO SPECIFICATIONS." In fact, it was not operating at all.

Back on our trip from Bath to Castle Combe, we learned that nearby was a village named Stratford sub Castle. I wonder how many other Stratfords there are in England.

In Oxford we collected several treasures, including one in a department store which announced "DISABLED TOILETS AND BABY CHANGING." At the Mitre, where we enjoyed several delicious meals, the maitre'd's table advised "BOOKINGS NOT ALWAYS NECESSARY." Indeed, on two occasions we were seated immediately without a reservation, although once there were ten of us. A less obliging eatery in Oxford advised "MINIMUM SPEND L 2.00 [from 2:00 to 12:00])."

When Paul went to Blackwell's Bookstore to get tickets for a Mozart concert at the Sheldonian Theater, the clerk asked him, "Concessions"? To Paul's puzzled look, he added, "Seniors, Students, Children under twelve . . ."? Another time, when Paul asked the admission fee to a fair advertising a million CD's, the man at the door told him, "One pound, but we don't have any classical CD's." Paul said, "You have me pegged," but when he added he was looking for rhythm and blues CD's our son couldn't find in the U.S., he did allow Paul to pay the fee and enter.

One hot evening we took some canned drinks back to our rooms. On the top of each Coca-Cola can was incised the words, "BEST BEFORE END." We finally discovered a date on the bottom of the cans. The advice must have been to consume the drink before the date on the bottom to assure freshness.

At Oriel College we discovered some of our favorite signs. Just outside our rooms were two notices: "PLEASE CLOSE THE WINDOWS WHEN YOU LEAVE YOUR ROOM TO PREVENT PIGEONS GETTING INTO THE ROOM" and "PLEASE DO NOT THROW TEABAGS OR MILK CARTONS OR ANY OTHER RUBBISH OUT OF THE WINDOWS." The requests were not very well heeded; through the window in Paul's room, we could see on the roof across the way several teabags as well as a couple of McDonald hamburger plastic containers. Not only that, I have to admit that I consistently left my windows open; fortunately, no pigeons flew in, either in my absence or presence.

Over the barred iron gate to our quadrangle at Oriel was a sign stating "DO NOT INTERFERE WITH THE DOOR DICTATOR. SUCH INTERFERENCE WILL DEACTIVATE THE ELECTRONIC LOCK." A notice outside the Porter's Lodge testified to the stress involved in the examinations, all of which were held at the Examination School on High Street. The notice forbade friends of students who traditionally gathered outside the examination hall to comfort or congratulate them from "POSSESSING ANY OBJECT WHICH COULD BE DAMAGING TO THE STUDENTS." We could only imagine what these objects might be: firecrackers, beer, or what? Other rules posted at the Porter's Lodge sounded more routine to our American ears. On the walk from the Porter's Lodge to our quarters, we discovered more interesting signs: In the tunnel below Oriel Street, a small vestibule in the wall showed two doors, one labeled "Oriel Guest Room" and the other stating, "ENSURE THAT THIS DOOR IS LOCKED PERSONAL INGREDIENTS ARE DISAPPEARING!" After we emerged from the tunnel and approached the stairs to our rooms, we saw a large sign stating "COLLEGE SISTER" as well as a sign posted in a second floor window "LIFT WELL. KEEP CLEAR." The College Sister was, of course, the college nurse, whereas Lift Well probably indicated an elevator shaft in the five-story building, information useful to firefighters in the event of a fire. The instructions in our rooms that in case of fire we were to gather in the tunnel under Oriel Street did not comfort me. I would have been very reluctant to occupy any place underground for any length of time during a fire.

Back in town near the bus station, we saw a sign posted in the window of a small pub: "PENSIONERS CLUB. LEFT BAGGAGE OPEN TO ANYONE." We'd already seen at the train station a sign for "LEFT" baggage, and thought that must have been a place to CHECK your bags until time to catch your train or bus instead of inviting anyone to make free with the baggage.

In all of our outings both in town and out, we became accustomed to hearing people talking about the QUEUES to enter certain popular places, so we weren't surprised to see at Warwick Castle a sign marking "LIMIT OF MAIN PARK QUEUE," but we weren't entirely sure what it meant. There were endless car queues to enter the car park near Stonehenge, along with equally long queues to climb the steep hill to view that ancient monument up close.

What we found remarkable was the good-natured patience we observed in all heavy traffic and other long queues for entrance to popular attractions. Not once in England did

we hear an impatient car honk or even an impatient queuer. In fact, even when pedestrians deserted crowded sidewalks for the streets, none of the cars honked. That patience was shown among people, too, on the congested sidewalks as hundreds of English and foreign tourists vied for space to get where they wanted to go. Possibly the only sign of impatience we observed was the quiet warning of a harried mother to her small daughter: "Don't speak to me that way, Modom, or I will smack your botTOM."

9-8-97

Oxford II

My desire to collect signs expressed in English-English rather than American-English got off to a successful start during our first hours in England, starting in Heathrow Airport and progressing on to Oriel College. At Oriel College, however, the quest turned into a broader search when I saw the notice in the anteroom to our lodging: "Please close the windows when you leave to prevent pigeons getting into the room." Underneath that sign was another one which read "Please do not throw teabags or milk cartons or any other rubbish out of the windows." The requests were not very well heeded; through the window in Paul's room we could see on the roof across the way teabags and McDonald hamburger plastic containers. Not only that, I consistently left my windows open; fortunately, no pigeons flew in either in my absence or presence.

Over the barred iron gate to O'Brien Quadrangle, opening off Oriel Street, was a sign stating "Do not interfere with the door dictator. Such interference will deactivate the electronic lock." That gate, which was locked after 7:30 p.m., was the entrance to a curved stone-lined corridor into our quad. After noticing that curve, I began observing the walls in the college compound. Most of them were curved, at least slightly, or contained interesting angles in the oriel windows. Such variation made the architectural detail endlessly interesting.

In order to make sense of a notice we found at the Porter's Lodge, it's necessary to tell about the examination procedure at Oxford University. All examinations for all thirty-nine colleges are held at the Examination School on High Street. Such examinations are very stressful, determining a student's success or failure in his pursuit of a degree. The notice forbade friends of students who traditionally gathered outside the examination hall to comfort or congratulate them from "possessing any object which could be damaging to the students." We could only imagine what these might be: firecrackers, beer, or what? Other rules posted at the Porter's Lodge sounded more routine to our American ears.

One of our group felt that in that small college climate there must be some place where "cooped up" students could gather to relax and let off steam. So he set upon a search, and sure enough, found a small student pub tucked away underneath the dining hall, with a sign limiting entrance to Students and Fellows.

I found the architecture in the various quadrangles of Oriel a source of great pleasure. The buildings in the main quadrangles were beautiful, with surprising, lovely large

windows on the second level (their first floor), many of them oriel windows, in keeping with the architecture of the time as well as the name of the college. One in particular in the second quad was especially intriguing. The window was larger than the others and was graceful and inviting, but I didn't feel free to investigate it. Was it fine quarters for a distinguished don? Was it an inviting seminar room? I found that every building, every vista, contained at least one, often several, oriel windows, always in harmony with the stone walls. There were two such bays across the walk from my room. Extending from the first through the fourth floors, they must have offered an interesting space to the rooms they enhanced. The repair work being done on that building prevented our exploring it, but one evening Paul and I were puzzled to see a light in one of the second-story windows, revealing a wall separating the angled window into two parts. That must have left one strange space where the window slanted out from the wall, ending abruptly in another wall.

On the walk from the Porter's Lodge to our quarters, we discovered more interesting signs: In the tunnel below Oriel Street, a small vestibule in the wall showed two doors, one labeled "Oriel Guest Room" and the other stating, "Ensure That This Door Is LOCKED. Personal Ingredients Are Disappearing!" After we emerged from the tunnel and approached the stairs to our rooms, we saw a large sign stating "COLLEGE SISTER," as well as a sign posted in a second-floor window proclaiming "LIFT WELL." The College Sister was, of course, the college nurse, whereas Lift Well probably indicated an elevator shaft in the five-story building, information useful to fire fighters in the event of a fire. As a matter of fact, the possibility of fire seemed to be a constant worry in the close quarters, despite sturdy stone walls. Clear directions of what to do in the emergency of a fire were posted in our rooms and at various other locations about the college. The tunnel we used after hours was designated a meeting place for occupants of our building, a place under the ground which I would have been very reluctant to occupy for any length of time during a fire.

I did not spend a great amount of time searching for interesting signs, but once our group discovered that I was collecting them, they all had fun giving me ones they had spotted that I might not otherwise have known about. In the process of checking out their contributions as well as gathering my own, I saw a great deal of Oxford University and city, the true object of my visit there. In our attempt to absorb all of the great things Oxford has to offer a visitor, the trivial pursuit of these signs lent a little piquancy and specificity to what otherwise might have become a great blur of museums, sights, and thirty-nine colleges founded as early as 1226 and as recently as 1993.