

The Last Field Study (So far...)

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Spring term one of 2020 promised to be exciting. It would be my first term back in the classroom as an adjunct after retiring from my OCF position and waiting out the required period to come back as an adjunct. I hadn't been in the classroom for more than six months, so it was a chance to test how my new lifestyle was working out. Even better, we were starting with my favorite course, Tudor England, and capping the term off with, joy of joys a field study, the Cultural history of London since 1666. This was a challenge, since though I had taught London I (up through 1666) many times, I had never taught London II before. But I love field studies, and I love a challenge, so it was a perfect "restart".

Field studies are something special, not only because you get to see and experience the place, immerse yourself in what you are studying, but because they are so intense- only seven days on the ground and three weeks of online work, and so much to cover. Even better though, is living together with a group of students for that week, forging a little academic community and watching the fun as it grows. Field Studies are also extremely work intensive for the instructor, figuring out what sites to see in order to make the points you want to highlight come alive, figuring out lodging for group, figuring out costs for everything and making it fit within a budget, working out a schedule around sometimes wonky opening times and site locations, organizing headsets, finalizing a schedule and making the final reservations. And this was a new one to me, so after consulting my emeritus friend Robert Louis- Abrahamson (the last to teach this course before me), I got down to it and February zoomed by.

But even as I planned away, a dark shadow started rearing its head in the news. Covid had arrived in Europe. Big chunks of Italy were quarantined. Next Spain saw it begin to spread. Then news of a first outbreak in Belgium. Every time I booked a tour, and saw the university put down some more money in advance, I began to wonder- will this really happen? Or will this new plague overtake us before we get to do it and all this money be wasted? The beginning of March got even more ominous. As the news got worse and worse, Italy locked down, and every country in Europe was considering it. Were we still really going? The online portion of the class began as scheduled. It then turned dark for me personally as my beloved dog Rufus went into decline and died on March 6. I spent the day before departure digging a grave in the pouring rain, glad of the rain so my daughters wouldn't see me crying while I dug it.

March 7 dawned clear though, and with no word from HQ to the contrary, I boarded the train to London on Saturday morning. I was looking forward to leaving my sadness behind and immersing myself in the Field study experience. But even on the train ride up, I wondered if any of this would really happen, or whether the whole continent would lock down and I would end up in London for the duration. I'm sure most of my students felt the same way--was it really wise to be travelling now? Are we going to get stuck?

Whatever such questions were in their minds, the students showed up for the first meeting. (Well, most of them. One had launched her own "Field Study" early and taken a bus to Stonehenge that morning, not realizing how far from London it was. She missed the

first rendezvous, but eventually caught up with us, thanks to our What's app group.) There were ten- a smaller than ideal group, given the preparation and expense of a field study. Sorry about that, Tony! But they were from all over, as far away as Naples, as close as RAF Croughton, less than sixty miles away. As expected, most were from Germany, but they were all, every one of them, interested and engaged in the class, and all week their enthusiasm, intellectual curiosity and eagerness to explore London bubbled, and occasionally boiled over. On that first day I could see they would grab the bull by the horns and be proactive, when they managed to get a last-minute reservation for twelve and a remarkable Indian banquet ensued, though I told them this cultural diversification of London lesson would have fit better with the lesson at the end of the class! But I was relieved--there would be no need for baby-sitting this group--in fact my biggest problem this time would be "free rangers" confidently setting off on their own agenda.

The first couple of days went great, and we forgot Covid for a minute. Everything according to schedule, and some of the activities were real highlights. Everyone really understood the power dynamics of standing in the square between the Bank of England and the Royal exchange, enjoyed climbing the great fire Monument, and soaked up the many lessons of Museum of London and the National Maritime Museum. One real highlight was St Paul's, where they came to see why this is seen as the "Protestant answer to St Peter's", built on British military power. This was seen in all the military burials there from Nelson through Wellington right down to Montgomery--they even had Cornwallis, which brought a smile to Americans! Another highlight was Tower Bridge, a piece of faux-Gothic Romanticism packed with "modern" Victorian Technology that so clearly illustrated the duality that was Victoria (the Romantic) and her husband Albert (the Modernist). And we felt chills on the late-night guided ramble through Whitechapel, learning about the dark side of industrial urban life on the trail of Jack the Ripper. To imagine, it took people living like this to build that bridge was scary in and of itself. And that just got us through Tuesday!

The shadow, however, was creeping up on us. Wednesday started out OK, and we walked right into the changing of the guard in the morning, but by afternoon it was a chilly rainy day, dreary, and when we got to the British Museum, we were all glad to be moving indoors. Unfortunately, one of our students got detained going through security check. There was a knife in her backpack! A German, she had not really thought much about it. It always just rode there. But in modern London, it was a major red flag, and she both lost her knife and was questioned extensively by security. Oh well, it gave me a chance to talk about the cultural impact of the fear of knife crime in modern London! If you learn a lesson, turn it into one, I always say. But we were undoubtedly down when we got back to our digs earlier than usual that evening, wet and tired.

And that is when I got the news. Spain was going into lockdown. The other field study that week, in Madrid, was being cancelled mid-week, and my old friend Lou D'Angelo was desperately scrambling to get everyone out of there and home right away. I felt really bad for Brian East, leading the Madrid class- what a nightmare that must be, and after all the hard work prepping, his very first field study gets overwhelmed by Covid! I also had a message from Lisa Rice- Dr Boone wanted to talk to me right away. This was ominous. I sent her a number, and waited, fearful that we were headed home too. But nothing happened. Andy didn't call that night, and I resolved to make Thursday the best Field study day ever, just get in as much as possible while we still could. If we got through Thursday, we could probably

finish the class, even if we had to leave a day early. The students by now knew what was going on, and we were all on tenterhooks--the shadow was with us the rest of the week--wondering when it was all going to be called off. I started noticing that, without even thinking about it, I was now wearing my scarf over my face all the time and putting on gloves every time I got on the tube (underground).

Anyway, Thursday was shaping up as a make-or-break day, and what a great day it turned out to be. Tate Britain knocked their socks off, seeing the paintings that depicted London life and changing attitudes really hit home--Hogarth, Turner and Rosetti really brought home all I'd been trying to tell them in the previous days. At lunch I decided to make a couple of improvisations that afternoon. The first, at the Victoria and Albert Museum was pure luck. In that vast hall of Victorian grandeur, we walked right into a remarkable exhibit on the evolution of the fashion industry in London, from the seventeenth century right up through the sixties. I couldn't resist, and what a great addition to our discussion of London culture it was. Less than an hour later, I made another snap decision- we were walking to the Hard Rock Café and going to see a legend I had heard about called "the Vault". The walk itself was a huge success, as it took us right past a memorial to the Hyde Park bombing of the Horse guards in 1982- a great introduction to tomorrow morning's lecture on London in the age of terrorism. And when we got to the Hard Rock "Vault", my wildest expectations were exceeded, as our guide gave us an eyewitness, first person, account of the London music scene in the 1960's, surrounded by the instruments actually used. Hearing about the Yardbirds while sitting on the floor between guitars used by Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page was quite a moment--the Beatles, the Stones, the Who, the Yardbirds, the Kinks--the whole swinging Sixties told by someone who was there. My students were spellbound. "Well, that's a part of the lecture on London culture I can pass over quickly tomorrow morning" I thought. And to think, I hadn't even planned on going to "the Vault" that morning! Talk about "value added"- and it was all free! Only on a Field study would I dare deviating from the program to improvise like this, and only on a field study could it work out so well.

Well, the last days were great--somewhere in there was a canal boat ride through the 19th century industrial district ending at Camden locks, and then of course there were Churchill's War Rooms. I had worried about this because it was way too expensive for our budget, but I found a way it fit it in by finding really excellent free stuff to see and do on other days. And it was worth it. The War Rooms were magnificent, and really gave one the claustrophobic feeling of living underground during the Blitz.

And that phone call pulling the class never came. On Thursday evening, Andy called and said we would finish, but needed to get out quickly on Saturday, and I was relieved. We didn't need to be told again to get out quickly though, because it was clear London was starting to shut down. On Friday night I went to meet to old friends at Covent Garden, the streets were emptying out, and when I caught the train at Paddington on Saturday, it certainly looked like this "get out of town" time was now here. When I got home that evening, the local authority (my wife) slapped me in a ten-day quarantine in a spare house trailer. But I had the new 800 pages by Hillary Mantel, and student work coming in soon online, so I was happy enough. By Sunday, the students from Germany were reporting that they had got back just in time--several of them on the last plane landing before lockdown. We were safely home and dry, back in the familiar territory of online work. All except for one. Our poor student from Naples was still trapped in London! Getting back to Italy was so difficult that in the end

the Navy temporarily transferred him to the small Navy detachment in London! It was several months before he could return to his original command.

Britain locked down on Monday. Also, one of the students in Germany messaged us all that day to say he had tested positive for Covid. So, the spectre was still there. The next two weeks of online work were excellent though, and the student projects remarkable, with inspired topics and great insights garnered from the field. The Last Field Study (so far), though poised on a knife edge all week, ended with tremendous success. Over a year of teaching via Zoom later, I hope we can begin again soon. There is nothing like a field study!