Fieldwork in Oxford and London - Impressions

Lana SINAPAYEN – IHS D1 – 31157815
18/09/2015

Abstract – Our group, composed of 6 students and 5 professors, spent one week in England for a series of visits and experiences on the topic of “The Shape of Life”. In this report I will start by giving some personal impressions about specific items of the fieldwork, then move on to more general comments about why this fieldwork was an asset on the professional and personal levels.

1 Commentary on Specific Items

In this section I will give my impressions about specific highlights of the fieldwork, illustrated with excerpts from my notebook.

1.1 Balliol College: The influence of traditions

We stayed at Balliol College for two nights. The college is close to 800 years old, and has kept some traditions that feel almost out of place in a modern world. One striking example is the dining room on the first floor (Fig. 1).

![Figure 1: Balliol College - Student Dining Room](image)

The students sit on benches at long tables. The professors eat at a table elevated as to look down on the whole room. They have individual chairs. The
feeling of distance between professors and students is exacerbated by the existence of a smaller dining room on the ground floor, serving a different menu and reserved to professors and guests.

It is very different from the canteen in Komaba, where professors and students can eat together. In my French university, there was also a canteen theoretically reserved for professors, but the only difference with the student canteen was that it served wine, and students could actually access it too. Professors often came to the students canteen and ate at the same table as us. The resulting feeling is that in Balliol, respect is due to the professors and their position is above the students, while in other places respect might have to be earned and does not manifest by physical means (high tables, better chairs).

Another interesting thing I learned from staying at Balliol is that environment played a much more important role than I thought in the writing of the book and film series “Harry Potter” by J.K. Rowling. As a French student that had never been to the UK, I read the book and strongly admired the imagination of the author. Common rooms for the students? Dining rooms with long tables? Professors eating on a podium? How original!

Now I realise that, while Rowling indeed has a great imagination, the inspiration comes strongly from the real world. Some of the film scenes were actually shot in the old buildings of Oxford. Numerous elements at Balliol made our group whisper: “It’s just like in Harry Potter!” The College has rooms underground, linked by tunnels. There are grinning faces carved at strange places on the walls, and portraits of the old Deans all around the dining room. It is maybe as exotic for a French person than for a Japanese person.

1.2 Ashmolean Museum: Ancient practical jokes

The Ashmolean museum has a beautiful huge collection. But lots of museums have beautiful objects. What struck me was that humour seems to finally have found a place in museums. As recently as 15 years ago, it seemed that any ancient object had to have a profound and important meaning. Everything was a god or a goddess or a sign of some deep intellectual interrogations, including the pornographic mosaics of Pompei.

In the Ashmolean Museum, a section was entirely about practical jokes (Fig. 2). This does not only bring a refreshing feeling to a place that usually has a rather serious image. It also reminds us that ancient people were mostly people just like us, simply living in a different environment. They liked a good laugh and had a dubious humour, just like us, and some of the objects we find are bound to be just jokes – not always representations of a deity or delicate work of pure art.
Figure 2: Ashmolean Museum - Drinking cup. I do not remember what the joke was, but other cups had globulous eyes on the bottom, or sculpted genitals.

1.3 The Tube of London: Where advertisement is actually interesting.

There are many differences between taking the subway in London and taking the subway in Tokyo. What I found most interesting was the advertisement (Fig. 3).

Figure 3: Subway of London - Posters

There is a lot of advertisement in the Tube – it is on every wall, in the station, in the escalator. But virtually everything is about selling cultural products or experiences. It gives a very different feeling to walk between posters for musicals and books, or to walk between ads for beer and beauty salons like in the subway of Tokyo.
The subway of Tokyo is oppressing. It is all about injunctions for both men and women – be pretty, be strong, study hard, do a good job, get married fast. When it’s not about that, it’s advertisement for magazines full of inanities.

Walking in the subway of London is actually exciting. It is not about me and who society says I should be. It is about how exciting my free time could be if I went to this or that museum, play, or bought that book. It is still mostly about buying a product, but a cultural product. It does not encourage to reflect about one’s life or appearance in a nongrilistic way, but to open one’s life to the outside world.

1.4 William Morris: A leading theme

The life of William Morris was something of a recurring topic during this fieldwork. At first I knew nothing about him and did not feel especially drawn to his way of thinking. Although I learned that he was of great influence in England, I did not like his way of romanticising the Middle Ages, and I did not find his craft beautiful.

But spending so much time learning about him, I grew fond of some aspects of his personality. How he treated his friends, or the fact that he tried his hand at so many different manual techniques made me admire him. I personally also have tried to weave, made indigo dye by myself, built straw hats and chairs, so hearing about his efforts to make the best dye for example, made empathetic. Spending time in the recreation of his workshop (Fig. 4) was unexpectedly exciting, for me who started with a bias against his views.

Figure 4: William Morris Gallery - Stencils from the workshop
1.5 Dennis Sever’s House: Liveliness without life?

I proposed to visit this house because I was interested in the notion of “presence” that was presented in the web description of the place. I was curious about knowing which tricks were going to make us feel as if the family of weavers was still living in the building.

My conclusion was that the most convincing method used to reach this goal was to leave things between two states (Fig. 5).

Figure 5: Dennis Severs’ House - Objects from the different rooms

For example, numerous cups of tea were scattered in the house. They were all half full, which forces us to think about the people who might live here. An empty cup of tea says nothing about how long it has been there; a full cup does not remind us of human presence. But a half empty cup suggests that someone drank it and left – maybe in a hurry? A broken vase says that someone broke it, and somebody else might come any moment to clean up. All these objects between two states leave the visitor with the feeling that people just left the room – and they will come back any moment, to continue where they were interrupted. It is this impression that we come between two phases of an event that give the feeling of “presence” and liveliness to the place.
1.6 The Science Museum: Exciting only if you know what to be excited about

Two students and I went to the Science Museum on their own proposal. It was a surprise to me: being the only non-humanities student, I had supposed that hard science and engineering were not all that interesting to my fellow students.

The museum has some very exciting objects related to the science history. I was especially happy to see the mechanical tortoise that is so famous among Artificial Intelligence enthusiasts. The interactive panels and video presentations were less interesting to me, as they were mostly directed to kids.

But my biggest regret is the lack of explanation both in the interactive activities and near the presented objects (Fig. 6).

![Figure 6: Science Museum - Very good but could be so much better](image)

Mostly, some dry facts were quoted, and the “explanation” stopped there. There was nothing about how things work, or why they were exposed, or why they are extraordinary. I did my best to palliate this lack of explanation to the other students, but I strongly felt that the potential of the museum was under-exploited. In my opinion, it is a good place for scientists to go once, but it fails at communicating both scientific knowledge and the excitement of doing science to non-scientists.
2 What I Gained on a Professional Level

One of the reasons I joined IHS is that I want to know how people view AI and what are the obstacles we may face when trying to build useful AI or trying to integrate AI into different societies around the world. I used this fieldwork as an opportunity to ask others about their image of current and future AI. It was very instructive.

- **People are excited about AI.** When hearing that my research subject is related to AI, everyone reacted very favourably. They think that AI has potential and that it can be useful to the present and future of society.

- **People are anxious about the AI apocalypse.** Sometimes as a joke, and sometimes seriously, most people asked: “So... Are robots going to destroy humanity a few years from now?” This feeling is lingering in a lot of non-AI scientists. It is regularly revived by apocalyptic movies and books, and more recently by a trend in famous scientists: public fear mongering.

- **People have no idea about the current state of AI.** This background fear of AI often seems to stem from vastly overestimating the current capabilities of AI and robots. Current AI has not solved the big problem that it already faced decades ago: the most basic human abilities are still tremendously difficult to reach for an artificial system. Presented with technological wonders as Google search engine or Apple voice recognition, the first reaction is to imagine how difficult the task would be to a human. But the algorithms behind have no semblance of human cognition – Google does not know what is a cat yet it can show you cat pictures, Siri does not “understand” any of the words you say yet she can answer in a coherent way. Machines can easily do what humans cannot do. They can calculate using big numbers, even if they do not know what a number is. They can move at astonishing speed, even if they don’t know that they are moving. But they are incredibly inefficient as such basic things as walking, understanding an image or a word, learning something new. AI apocalypse is not for today, anyone can agree on that. My personal opinion, based on technical and philosophical arguments, is that it is not for tomorrow and not ever going to happen.

3 What I Gained on a Personal Level

This fieldwork was for me the occasion to reinforce a belief that I first developed during a different IHS project: humanities student are walking reservoirs of vast knowledge.

This week would not have been the same without all the explanations about architecture, history, literature, painting, theatre, immigration, gentrification, that all the members contributed to each visit. This group trip was incredibly richer than any trip I have done by myself.
Furthermore, unlike a simple lecture, the examples and usefulness of this knowledge were immediately tangible. By the end of the week, I was pointing at all buildings asking the other members if they thought it was gothic, or maybe neo-gothic? Noticing the mosaic on the Museum of Natural History reminded me of Keble College mosaics in Oxford. I was thrilled to learn that Blenheim Palace was designed by the same non-architect who designed Castle Howard, that I had visited before without any explanation about the history, architecture or design of the place. I was proud when, spotting a particular bookmark in a shop at the airport, I found the design to be very “William-Morrisian”, and the label indeed proved me right. Suddenly, buildings and paintings were not just “historical” or “interesting”, they had been built with a goal, had a particular history that could be guessed and linked them to other buildings, other paintings, people and politics.