

CWIT Creative Writing Fellow (2014) at University of Chichester A Report

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I had arrived in England in early March, just after the winter rains, and was living in the one-hundred-seventy-five year old Oakland House right next to the campus of my university. Oakland House, despite its years, is a handsome building that had once belonged to the owner of a brewery and now had university offices on the ground floor and private accommodation upstairs. Walking up the tree lined College Lane from the town centre, the campus of the university was to our right and the two storey house with its pillared front porch was to the left. West of College Lane and beyond the house was the sprawling green of Oakland park where in the mornings elderly couples would come out to walk their dogs and the evenings would be animated with games of cricket or rugby. The town centre of Chichester with its Roman market cross (the Romans called the town Noviomagus Reginorum) and cathedral was south of the park, a short walk of about fifteen minutes through daisy sprinkled grass, past Festival theatre which would come alive with plays and performances in the evenings. But perhaps the best thing about my home in England was its proximity to the university library which was just a two minutes walk away.

I had been working on a novella which has a lot of England in it and Chichester, between the sea and the South Downs, its proximity to pretty English villages where time seemed to have stood still and London not very far, provided an ideal retreat for contemplation and concentrated writing. The bonus of course was the conversation with the teachers of the English and Creative Writing department and the access to resources of the library, which helped me in fashioning the world of my story.



While the books in the library sent me on a journey of discovery, enriching my work with detail and socio-historical context, the professors at the department chipped in with writing tips and nuggets of experience all of which benefitted my writing. The English and Creative Writing department of my university is staffed by poets and playwrights, novelists and storytellers, critics and non fiction writers and my conversations with them facilitated my engagement with the subject with a detective's keen eye and the literary writer's perceptiveness all in the matter of a few months.

I spent many an afternoon meeting the teachers at the university's Zee Café or out in one of the pubs in town; usually it would be the George and Dragon. We discussed everything from elemental figures like John Barleycorn to parallels between Aldous Huxley and David Mitchell's writing, while nursing pints of our favourite bitters. My professors were more than generous in sharing their insights weaving for me a textured picture of my subject.

The English and Creative writing department at the university also hosts Royal Literary Fund fellows and a number of sponsored Ph.D. students and I was lucky to strike up friendships. Among these scholars were published writers and poets, storytellers and fantasy fiction aficionados and two of them had lived or was writing about India. Naturally we had notes to exchange about writing, research techniques and ways of approaching the material at hand.

The university has quite a busy calendar of events and I got the opportunity to attend a number of talks and readings by well known authors or academics which were all very illuminating besides providing good networking opportunities with fellow writers, literary agents and the publishing fraternity. One of these evenings in late April, the department organised a reading, including me with two other writers



(Mark Floyer and K.J. Orr) where I read excerpts from my second novel (*Hotel Calcutta*). Though it was almost end of semester, the old Cloisters hall of University House was quite full and the audience of teachers, students and the curious was warm and supportive.

Because my characters are wanderers, I too travelled a bit in England soaking up the beauty of the land, meeting strangers and old friends in London, exploring museums and galleries, pubs and palaces. I went up to Oxford and down to the Isle of Wight beyond the choppy waters of the Solent. My book also took me westwards to charming Salisbury and the mystical Stonehenge and south east to Brighton where acclaimed novelist Alison Macleod (who teaches at the English department) was happy to show me around Charleston farmhouse, steeped in the memory of Vanessa and Clive Bell, Virginia Woolf, Duncan Grant and other members of the Bloomsbury group.

Stephen Mollett, dramatist and my academic contact was always generous with suggestions of places to visit and he took me on a tour of the South Downs to the little town of Midhurst with its memory of H.G. Wells, to English villages with thousand year old churches and on to a quintessential country pub that, like many such places in England, had a history running into centuries. Whenever I had a question about something, Stephen was always happy to share information and so it was from him I learnt about the use of hagioscopes in old churches and to recognise the ubiquitous Queen Anne's lace which previously had been just another unknown flower by the roadside.

The Charles Wallace fellowship has not only helped me write the first draft of my novella, it also introduced me to a nation with which we share a complicated and long



history. I returned to India in June not only with a rich store of experience but also with a nuanced understanding of England and the English and I guess it will all be reflected in my new book. Now as I edit the story, I remember each day ever so vividly. The characters and the settings, the living statues of Covent Garden and the cacophony of Victoria, all seem to leap out from the pages every morning when I click open the file with my English story.

Everyone at the department but especially Stephen, Alison, David Swann, Duncan Salkfeld, Hugh Dunkerley, Lorna Sargent, Simon Barker, Stavroula Varella and Stephanie Norgate come to my mind and I know I can't really thank them enough. I am beholden to Richard Alford of CWIT, for his warm welcome and confidence in my work. Richard took the trouble to travel all the way to Chichester to spend a day with us to make sure that I had settled in fine and was not facing any difficulties. I remember much else. I remember getting caught without an umbrella in a London downpour while trying to negotiate my way to Tate Modern with a friend or trying in vain to guess when is the best time to buy cheap train tickets. All of it made my stay memorable. From fish and chips to Iceland's frozen meals, most of it worked for me. As did the wood pigeon in the garden behind Oakland House, softly cooing away on lazy summer evenings, egging me on to put a few more lines on the page before calling it a day.

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