

For: Ten years of Geography & Earth Sciences at Brunel University book, 2007 – on the eve of the closure of the Dept.

From Ouagadougou to Osterley

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now

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I arrived at the Osterley campus of the West London Institute of Higher Education (WLIHE) in 1993, to begin a 3 year lectureship in Human Geography in the "School of Human and Environmental Sciences". This comprised Geography/Geology and Sports Sciences (strange how history can repeat itself).

Although I grew up in South-East London, I had been away from the UK for some time, in the USA and then Africa. In 1993 I was living in a small village in northern Burkina Faso, conducting the last of my PhD fieldwork on the political ecology of soil and water conservation, affiliated to a German development project. My Mum faxed out the tiny job ad to Africa. Miraculously, I received it (after a long motorbike ride to an office on my Honda twincam, in 100°F heat). I applied, got an interview. Get a cheap flight, they said. So I took an Air Algeria flight from Ouagadougou to London. On the first leg across the Sahara, the (male) cabin crew spent most of the time sleeping across the back seats. Until, that is, the plane was forced down by the authorities, landing at Constantine where we were ushered off by soldiers with AK47s. We later learned the military had received a tip-off that Algerian FIS terrorists were on board.

Three airports and a few hours sleep later, I arrived on the Osterley campus like a budding Nigel Barley, somewhat shaken, a bit out of practice at talking for long periods in English, gaunt and underweight. At least I had shaved off my beard prior to the interview. Somehow I must have impressed John Stone and the other 8 geographers and geologists, because I got the job. After a few months back in Africa I started work in Osterley. I had a false start when I fell sick, but eventually I taught my first students in a section of a course that Alan Hamlin had palmed off on me. I also rented a room in Alan's spartan house in Northfields, paying an insignificant, almost Dickensian sum. By the time he sadly died and the place was sold in 1998, we had fixed it up nicely, often with furniture and building materials from the skips out the back at WLIHE.

WLIHE was my first introduction to university lecturing. I taught about international development and human-environment relationships for several years, although I never managed to take students to Africa. These topics have always seized student interest, particularly in multicultural London with its strong international links and its development industry. I enjoyed it, and learned a lot from some great colleagues and

students, some of the first ones being trainee geography teachers. I've worked at five other universities now, all of them bigger and more prestigious, and never had such camaraderie and a sense of shared endeavour. And it is good to reflect on the Department's staff and students – three TV and radio stars (Iain Stuart, Bill McGuire and Sue Buckingham– not to forget Derek Rust, asked in 1995 to appear on TV to offer a hard-nosed geological explanation for the miraculous event of a Ganesh statue in a Hindu Temple in Southall that was seemingly able to "drink" milk from a proffered spoon). There were some sports celebs and Olympians among our Osterley students, and others went on to great things in the arts and media. And there are now a few Professors among my former colleagues (promoted suspiciously young, I might add).

WLIHE, and later Brunel, could be frustrating places to work. At Osterley, there was always some resistance by management to the reality that we were "real" university staff, not just teachers. Not realizing that we were really the vanguard of the Institute, campus security thwarted our research aspirations by persistently locking us out of the building every night. Personally, this meant I was kicked out just as I was settling down to research work (no home computer or email in those days). The guards and I played cat and mouse. I even copied the door key illegally, but they found out and changed the locks. There were times when we ran short of money for photocopying, overheads, and so forth. I was briefly infamous for writing to the newspaper to disown staff from the management's decision to award an honorary Brunel doctorate to Margaret Thatcher. WLIHE had by then merged with Brunel, and we soon got the picture that we had a joined a pretty conservative university in a Conservative Borough, mostly famous for things we didn't do – engineering and technology.

Despite this, Brunel's Vice Chancellor Mike Sterling gave us Departmental status, and eventually moved us up to the main campus at Uxbridge. Morale was good. Our small Department always had aspirations to move on and upward, and many hours were put in by everybody, demonstrating both conviction and a sense of shared ownership. From the early days students were on first name terms with us, and studied hard despite their varied backgrounds and a frequent need to keep part time jobs. I said with conviction that GES had the "best relations and mentoring of students you will find anywhere in the UK". Aside from teaching, and hanging out with our students on numerous fieldtrips, we did our research. I was the first geographer at an H.E. College to receive an ESRC grant (in 1995, shortly followed by Fiona Smith), and Steve Kershaw and Iain Stewart were hitting the top Earth Science journals with their work – although I have never been able to see what is so interesting about fossilised sponges and cracks in rocks! Even though our PhD students were always small in number and the first few failed to complete, our Masters in Environmental Change, instigated by Callum Firth, was a success. We even had our own journal, the *West London Papers in Environmental Studies* (until 1996).

I remember constant change in the 1990s – to the curriculum, to staffing, then the years of the merger with Brunel, briefly teaching on two campuses, and always burning the midnight oil trying to finish articles and ESRC research, with Andrew Warren down at UCL and a small team, against the background pressure of the dreaded RAE. Finally relocated and installed at Uxbridge, we tried to settle in and bask in the ample new office

and lab space, but we watched in dismay as Physics and Chemistry were closed around us (giving us yet more space). By the late 1990s – after years of graft- we still could not confidently say we had "arrived" as a secure Department. We didn't get *quite* enough students, or *quite* enough research done, or grants awarded, to clamber our way up the greasy pole of the national rankings. The "applied" focus of research among the human geographers was working a little against the intellectual tide as well, I believe, even through I strongly believe in it, and my successors have continued such work with huge success. We could never afford to relax in the national Research Assessment, audit driven culture. And the demons of the Brutalist campus architecture were looming, biding their time and waiting to pounce.

By 1999 I ceased enjoying going into work at Uxbridge for reasons some of you will know, and my wife Judy was tiring of her very full-on policy job at IIED in central London. Between us we were often doing 100 or more hours of work a week, and not starting a family. It was time to look for something different. I also received a strange sign one morning – I fell into the Grand Union canal, cycling too fast down the towpath, 20 minutes before a lecture. It was the depths of winter and I discovered the sediment down there is pretty deep and unpleasant. Emerging with mud up to my waist and infiltrating my bike panniers, sniggered at by sedentary carp fishermen and observed by a heron, I hankered for new geographies. I actually ended up with a new job at the LSE rather than overseas as I had hoped, working briefly at the very place I had idolized as an A-level student. Research work was much easier there, but it was only temporary - then we were off on an eccentric orbit - Arizona, Roskilde, and now Melbourne, with research and policy work in the Sahel, Australia, East Timor, and the French Pacific. My son (4) holds 3 passports, and we still make trips to the UK. And of course, I still believe that geography is vital for understanding the world and changing things for the better – even if we still have a few people to convince of that (including University Deans, policymakers, and most of the general public...) .

I could be dishonest, and say that I never think back to those early days of fieldtrips around West London with Alan Hamlin explaining the sewerage network to Sports Studies students more interested in reading *The Sun* in the back of the coach..... or that I have forgotten having to shout to be heard in lectures as Concorde flew directly overhead on its daily Heathrow approach. But "geographical" memories are hard to put aside. I do recall, sometimes with a hint of anger, the neoliberal restructuring that infests British universities and seems always to go after the wrong targets. In 2004, I wrote to Brunel's then-VC Stephen Schwartz that instead of closing GES, he should "consider investing in this shining beacon in the Brunel concrete jungle" or at least "... go and spend a day or two in the Department, and you will see what I mean". He didn't. He is now experiencing some problems at Macquarie University, where his climate change researchers just walked, en masse.

But, most often these days – as we fight our own battles for the survival of Geography and Environmental Studies at our own University and across Australia, I look back on my days at Osterley and Uxbridge with fondness and some pride.

It was a long way from Ouagadougou to Osterley, and it's a long way from Melbourne (16,900km). Happy anniversary.