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OU Law Updates: The Oxford Experience

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The *Oxford*

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Since the mid-70s, hundreds of law students have enjoyed the magical experience of the Oxford Summer Program of the University of Oklahoma College of Law. This summer, for five weeks during July and August, 38 students, including 10 from other law schools, made Oxford University their home. They lived and studied in the centuries-old buildings and sampled the British way of life.

Six classes totaling 12 credit hours were offered and students enrolled in four to six credit hours. During the first four weeks of the session, classes did not meet on Fridays, leaving students with long weekends for travel.

The OU Law faculty members teaching were Robert G. Spector, Steven S. Gensler and Liesa L. Richter. They were joined by English faculty Dr. Jonathan Black-Branch, professor of international law at the University of Brighton, and Sir David Yardley, former chief ombudsman for England and Wales and chairman emeritus of the



Students gather around Deanell Tacha, distinguished jurist in residence, during an outdoor reception.

Commission for Local Administration. The distinguished jurist in residence was Deanell Reece Tacha, who retired after serving more than 25 years on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit to become dean of Pepperdine University School of Law.

This summer marked the 37th anniversary of the program and the “changing of the guard” in terms of leadership. Since 1999, Spector has served as director of the program, coordinating and overseeing a multitude of details that enable the five-week session to run smoothly. At the conclusion of the 2011 program, Spector turned over the director’s job to Gensler.

Four students who participated in the program agreed to share some of their special memories of their summer at Oxford. Edited excerpts from their stories on topics ranging from classes and instructors to adventures in travel, illustrate how incredibly full and memorable the experience can be.

Andrew J. Morris

“It’s not often you get to hear from a rock star of the legal profession.” This is how Deanell Tacha, current dean of Pepperdine University School of Law and former chief judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit, was introduced by her former law clerk, OU Professor Steven Gensler. Little did we know how right he was.

Dean Tacha has had a legal career most can only dream of. After graduating from the University of Kansas, she received her juris doctor degree from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. After serving as a White House Fellow, she joined Hogan and Hartson

in Washington D.C. and later returned home to Kansas to practice and teach law at the University of Kansas School of Law.

Tacha served as a member of the federal bench from 1985 to 2011, including seven years as chief judge. In 2008, she was awarded the Edward J. Devitt Distinguished Service to Justice Award by the American Judicature Society. To understate the obvious, Dean Tacha’s career has been (and continues to be) extraordinary.

Possibly the most amazing thing about the dean is her kindness. She was happy to spend time with students outside of class, answer endless questions, and even joke about British cuisine.

Tacha taught Defining the Rule of Law, a course examining not only the American basis for “a government of laws, and not of men,” but also the extent to which other countries honor or dishonor the rule of law. As part of the delegation that assisted Albania in writing a new constitution in 1992, she knows what she’s talking about when discussing the role of the rule of law abroad.



Professors Robert Spector, Steven Gensler, Deanell Tacha and Liesa Richter served as faculty members for the 2011 Oxford Summer Program.

Tacha stressed the need for independent and passionate judges as defenders and implementers of the rule of law. She knows that the talk of ideological biases is often just that – talk. The vast majority of judges looks at the facts, the law, precedent, and common sense and makes decisions based on the case at hand.

She is an advocate of the efforts of judges and lawyers worldwide to demand independence and fairness in judicial systems. She shared stories of judges and lawyers protesting in the streets for the right to do their jobs.

To have such an extraordinary person as a professor was the chance of a lifetime. And it was an opportunity I had only because I was lucky enough to attend OU Law's Oxford Program.

Lauren Hammonds

Oxford was a fairytale dream-come-true. I slept in a castle, saw the wedding dress of a princess-to-be, and, frequently, ate dinner with a knight. It was a bit of an adjustment returning to the "simple life" in Norman.

For all 37 years of OU Law's Oxford Summer Program, Professor Sir David Yardley, chairman emeritus, Commission for Local Administration in England, former chief ombudsman for England and Wales, and all things noble and honorable, has been a part of the program as a visiting lecturer.



Sir David Yardley visits with students during his 37th and final year with the Oxford Summer Program.

This was his last summer with the program, but that did not prevent him from sharing his wisdom, stories and presence with our group. One evening, I had the pleasure of dining with Sir David in Brasenose College Hall. As we chatted over our roast lamb and potatoes, it began to sink in...I was eating dinner with a real knight.

The second part of my fairytale trip took place in London, about an hour southeast of Oxford. I toured Buckingham Palace and saw the Duchess of Cambridge's wedding dress on display. After touring the state rooms of Buckingham Palace, filled with Rembrandts, van Dycks and gifts from countries all over the world, I made my way into the elaborate ballroom. In the center of the room on a dimly-lit pedestal was the dress. The hand-sewn lacework and fine details were stunning.

After seeing the dress, the Churchill War Rooms were next. The War Rooms are an underground bunker in London where the prime minister and cabinet members took refuge from bombs and planned the English strategy for WWII. Walking down the steps into the bunker was like walking back in time.

Even deeper is the Churchill Museum. It tells the story of a colorful man, sometimes stubborn or demanding, who served his country and the world, for many years. The most surprising part of Churchill's life was what he did after retiring from political service. He was a talented oil painter and many of his landscapes and doodles were on display in the museum.

Sir Winston Churchill said, "[t]he farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see." Viewing a piece of recent history belonging to the next generation of monarchs, hearing the stories of Sir David, and walking through the very rooms Sir Winston Churchill used to pace, allowed me to look backward in time.

The trip to Oxford was more than a vacation abroad; it was an opportunity to step back and view my place in time and to decide what type of impact I will make on the world.

Lark E. Zink

One of the highlights of our European travels was a trip to Malahide Castle, one of the oldest castles in Ireland. Despite the tumultuous course of Irish history, it was held by the Talbot family for nearly 800 years, until it was finally sold to the Irish state and converted to a tourist destination.

Many castles now open to tour have been pillaged or looted for profit. Not so with Malahide. The remarkable highlight of the tour at Malahide was that despite this history, the castle is fully furnished with marble fireplaces, ornate rococo ceilings, period furniture and paintings.

At Oxford, classes were taught by eminent faculty. But the true value of the Oxford experience is that learning and growth opportunities do not stop at the classroom walls. Like Malahide Castle, the OU Oxford Program offers a fully furnished experience. Social events included taking a legal tour of London; Harry Potter and James Bond theme parties; hearing a knight, Sir David Yardley, extol the virtues of scholarly research; and experiencing Europe both inside and outside the classroom setting.

What I most appreciated about Oxford was the opportunity to immerse myself in the student life. My experience is atypical, in that I left my husband and two small boys back at home for the five weeks of the program. It was the first time that I had been away from them for an extended period of time.

While at Oxford, there was daily maid service to turn down the bed and replace towels and most breakfasts and dinners were provided. This meant that after both classes and Skyping back home with the boys, I still had plenty of free time!

Oxford is a beautiful town to discover on foot. A quick stop by the covered market and on to Christ Church Meadow meant impromptu picnics were a favorite standby. In the evenings, Oxford does not sleep, and there was no shortage of entertainment. From baroque music by candlelight to open-air Shakespeare performances, movies to staged musicals at theatre houses, and the local pubs to the clubs, there were plenty of entertainment options.

Planning the weekend's day trips also became a hobby of sorts. The Cotswolds, Stonehenge and London are all a short bus, train or car ride away. And I couldn't pass on the opportunity to see the Mont St. Michel or the Normandy coast in France.

Oxford was an incredible opportunity for both intellectual and cultural growth. And a tremendously good time.

Dylan C. Edwards

One of the best parts of my Oxford experience was the opportunity to explore new cultures through traveling both before and during the program. A group of friends and I decided to plan a trip to Italy before commencement of classes in Oxford. After flying into London and dropping off most of our luggage with a section-mate's very generous parents, we hopped right back on a plane to Italy.

After an overnight stop in Milan, and our first of many experiences with the European phenomenon known as "trains," we found ourselves on the beautiful Italian Riviera. We stayed along the coast in one of the five villages of Cinque Terre and enjoyed remarkable views, succulent dishes and a long hiking adventure.

After leaving Cinque Terre by rail, we headed inland into the hills of Tuscany. We rented a car and took our chances on the Italian highways. As the only member of the troupe who could

operate the manual transmission, my fellow travelers put their lives in my hands as we wound through the mountains to our incredible apartment near San Gimignano, approximately 40 miles south of Florence.



A visit to a village of the Cinque Terre on the Italian Riviera was just one of the extracurricular travel experiences of students in the program.

We took up residence on a hill, overlooking a breathtaking valley filled with vineyards, olive orchards, small farms and the Tuscan sun. Highlights from this portion of the trip included visits to several medieval towns, the taste of real gelato, enjoying the Fourth of July cliff-side at an amazing restaurant and the comedy of errors associated with driving and parking in Italy.

We flew back from Italy and arrived in Oxford, joining the rest of the group to begin our studies. It was clear from the beginning that there would be two phases of the program: the time during the week in Oxford, and the weekends. Come Friday morning, different groups would depart to destinations both within the United Kingdom and beyond.

One of my most memorable trips was to Edinburgh and St. Andrews in Scotland. A few of us also had the chance to attend the British Open, which was a great, and very wet, time. I also enjoyed trips to London and Amsterdam.

I think one of the best parts of my travels during the Oxford program was experiencing it with friends, both old and new. In my first year of law school, I was fortunate to be part of a section that bonded very well. Much of my extracurricular time was spent with my section-mates. Attending the Oxford program was a great opportunity to branch out and make new friends.