The Woodberry at Oxford program returns this summer after a two-year hiatus, during which there has been extensive renovation of Brasenose College, our home for three weeks in July. The focus of the program will be on understanding contemporary and historical Britain by writing about our activities in and around one of the world’s great universities. The course will essentially be a writer’s workshop in which students use a journal to record and reflect on their daily life in Oxford, on visits to sites such as Stonehenge, Salisbury Cathedral, and Blenheim Palace, and on excursions into London. The program leaders, Ben Hale and Richard Barnhardt, have had extensive experience at Oxford and were the leaders of the Woodberry at Oxford programs in 2003 and 2004. The program is open to rising fifth and sixth formers. Applications may be obtained from Mr. Barnhardt. The twelve students selected to participate in the “Writing Britain” program this summer will earn a one-trimester credit in English while having an extraordinary and enriching encounter with Britain past and present.

Brasenose College, founded in 1509, is one of the 38 colleges that comprise Oxford University. Brasenose is located in the heart of the university adjacent to the Bodleian Library, Radcliff Camera, the Sheldonian Theatre, and St. Mary’s Chapel. The accommodations are all comfortably furnished single rooms arranged along a common corridor with newly renovated bathroom facilities. Although most of our meals will be served in the Hall, the college dining room where the food is plentiful and tasty, we will also sample the fare at local pubs, such as the Eagle & Child, and at local ethnic restaurants, like the Jamaican Eating Place. Brasenose will provide us with a well-equipped seminar room for our classes, and students will have access to the college’s computer center and to Brasenose’s equivalent of the Fir Tree. Security is tightly maintained by the Porter’s Lodge, by which no one may pass without the porter’s approval or, after hours, without possession of a key.

Although we will frequently venture into and beyond the city of Oxford, most of our time will be spent “in college” and in the immediate vicinity of Brasenose. A typical day will begin with breakfast in the Hall at 8:15, followed by a morning classroom period during which we will read and discuss the daily newspapers and other texts and write in and share writing from our journals. Lunch in the Hall is a self-serve buffet, after which there will be a brief classroom session and then often a walking excursion around Oxford or along the Thames. There will be a good block of free time in the afternoons before dinner for students to explore Oxford on their own, to do their laundry and other household chores, or catch up on email or just relax. Dinner is a seated meal in the Hall, followed by a brief evening session that can range from the BBC evening news to viewing a film such as Chariots of Fire. There will usually be free time from 9:00 until 11:00, when students must check in and remain in college for the night.

In the course of the three-week program, students will come to know the university and the city of Oxford very well. On the day we arrive, students will go on an Oxford scavenger hunt that will introduce them to some of the more famous sites in Oxford and give them a good orientation to the city. Thereafter they will have projects that will take them into many of the colleges, such as Christ Church whose ornate Hall appears in the Harry Potter movies, and to sites associated with Kings Richard I and Charles I, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, architect Christopher Wren, and writers Lewis Carroll, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien. We will tour the Bodleian Library, enjoy a concert at the Sheldonian Theatre, and attend one of the outdoor dramatic productions mounted each summer by the colleges.
Walks long the Thames will take us to the Iffley Church, an 11th century Norman gem, and upstream to St. Margaret’s Church and to the Trout Inn, favorite pub of Inspector Morse. Not much farther away are Blenheim Palace, birthplace of Winston Churchill, and the Neolithic sites at White Horse Hill. We will also take day trips farther afield to Neolithic sites such as Stone Henge or Avebury, to the Roman ruins at Bath, and to the gothic cathedrals at Salisbury, Winchester, or St. Albans. We will go on two or three day-long excursions to London, the last of which will be the “London Survivor.” Students will set out from Oxford in two-man teams equipped with a map, a small amount of cash, and a list of three sites they must visit in the city before rendezvousing in Leicester Square for dinner and a play or movie.

Wherever we go, we will be packing our journals. Students will use their journals to capture the full range of sensory phenomenon—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures—to create scenes, and tell anecdotes and stories. The journal will also include the reactions to those experiences: the ideas, feelings, thoughts, questions, and opinions the student encounters. The activities of being closely—and thoughtfully—observant and paying careful attention will be a daily theme in the course. In a writer’s workshop setting we will discuss close observation, concrete images, specific details, point of view, and all the ways one can construct an interesting and informative narrative from even commonplace scenes like shopping in the Covered Market or buying a donner kebab from the trucks parked along the High Street at night. We will venture into the blogosphere with pictures and a daily account of our activities written by the students, and our final project will be a set of narratives published online and in print under the title “Writing Britain.”

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