

LIBRARIANS IN LONDON

by Lauren Dodd

British Studies, an established study abroad program at the University of Southern Mississippi, allows undergraduate and graduate students from all over the country to live in London for three weeks, take a three-day academic excursion to cities like Edinburgh, Paris, and Amsterdam, and utilize a five-day mini-break to visit anywhere else—all while receiving six hours of course credit toward their degrees. It sounds too good to be true, right? Nope—it is real, and it is spectacular. I was a participant of the 2009 British Studies Program, and I want to share a brief account of my experience, hoping to encourage any SLISers looking for unique electives and an unforgettable trip to consider this—or any—study abroad opportunity.

On January 10, 2009, three days after I began my first semester at SLIS, Dr. Teresa Welsh sent out a message on the SLIS-L listserv that introduced her two BSP courses, LIS 580/587, British Libraries and Information Centres, and provided links to her BSP website. The student blogs from previous classes were full of enthusiasm and awe. The syllabus looked amazing—every day was a visit to a different library, archive, or museum in London. In addition to London, the class would be visiting Oxford and Stratford-Upon-Avon, as well as Edinburgh, Scotland. Even though I was brand new to the world of library science, I realized that this would be an invaluable learning opportunity and an incredible life experience—one I would likely regret overlooking.

I applied for the program immediately and received my acceptance package less than a month later. A few months after that, I met my future classmates virtually through Blackboard, and we introduced ourselves and discussed mini-break plans. The other students were from graduate programs in library science all across the nation, and only two of us were from Southern library programs.



Lauren Dodd on the London Eye
with Big Ben in the distance.

We had an optional list of books to read in preparation for the trip, and I tried to locate and read as many as I could before I left. The books were fascinating, and directly related to sites we visited, such as *Longitude* by Dava Sobel, a book everyone should read before visiting the Royal Observatory in Greenwich; *The Professor and the Madman*, a true, twisted tale about the history of the Oxford English Dictionary; and *The Map That Changed the World*, which relates the paradigmatic shift in thinking caused by the development of geology in England.

On July 10, 2009, I finally arrived in London. I was tired and jet lagged, not to mention nervous, but Dr. Welsh was welcoming and helpful. The next two days all of the students in the program attended “London Calling” activities to help orient us to London. I chose a literary pub crawl and a boat ride on the Thames River to Greenwich, but there were so many fascinating activities, such as shopping at Harrod’s or taking a punk rock tour through Camden Town. The following Monday our academic days began, and the rest of the month was a whirlwind of visits and exploration.



Students participating in the University of Southern Mississippi’s
British Studies program visit the Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh.

The information centres we visited did not disappoint. We were allowed rare access to St. Paul’s Cathedral Library, where we trudged up the dizzying stone staircase seen in Harry Potter movies, and met the most aptly named librarian ever—Joseph

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Wisdom. The National Art Library at the Victoria and Albert Museum was gorgeous, and filled with eclectic special collections that ranged from handwritten Keats and Dickens manuscripts to books that were pieces of art themselves. The V & A Museum was incredibly quirky and fun. The Shakespeare Centre Library and Archive in Stratford-Upon-Avon was small, but full of treasures, like a Shakespeare First Folio (one of three I got to see!). The public libraries we visited, the Barbican Library in London and the Central Lending Library in Edinburgh, were exemplary, with rich collections, excellent programming, and award-winning librarians. The sole academic library we visited as a group, the Bodleian in Oxford, was intimidating, beautiful, and steeped in history. Our visits to the British Museum and the Museum of London were overwhelming, but they were full of incredible artifacts and stories. The National Archives of Scotland was such an incredible resource that I was determined to find my Scottish ancestors and look them up in the Archives during my next trip to Edinburgh. Though each information centre captivated me, the British Library felt like my mothership. Halfway through our visit, I knew that my trip had been worth it just for that experience alone. We also got a great tour of the British Library Centre for Conservation, which was my first glimpse of conservation work. The professionals there astounded me with their techniques for saving irreplaceable books and periodicals.

In addition to the places we traveled as a class, we were required to visit at least three other information centres in London, Edinburgh, or our mini-break location to write about for our blogs. I visited the Wellcome Medical Library, the Feminist Library, the Women's Library, and the Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh. I forged a close connection with the Feminist Library, and it became the topic of my annotated bibliography and research paper. I was grateful for the research component of the course, as scouring the literature for information about this institution opened my eyes to issues in both librarianship and feminism I didn't even know existed.

While I have spent a lot of time describing libraries, I also cannot say enough good things about my professor, Dr. Welsh, and the future librarians I spent a month with. Meeting people in this field and sharing this experience with them has provided me with lifelong friends and potential colleague relationships. Several of us are planning to meet up again at the 2010 SLA conference.

As far as individual travel and exploration goes, there was surprisingly plenty of time for it. When each day's tour was over, we were free to spend the rest of the day touring London, shopping, or having a pint. Furthermore, when we finished our academic days in Edinburgh, we could leave at any time for a mini-break (although a few of us stuck around for ghost tours and a Scottish Highland tour before embarking on our mini-break destinations).

For many, the 2010 British Studies Program will be bad timing (July 1-August 1), and most will be hesitant to invest so much money into one month (I went the loan route). However, if you're looking for an opportunity that is the perfect mix of education and recreation, this trip is for you. There are some cons, of course. You will go to bed late, wake up early, and walk so much each day you think your feet might fall off. You will sleep in a room the size of a closet, and shower in a room the size of a bathtub. You will live out of one or two suitcases for a month. Unless you bring a laptop and purchase a wireless internet stick from Carphone Warehouse, your only internet access will be an ancient computer lab across the street. You will (eventually) miss your loved ones. But if you go, you will love it, and as soon as you leave you'll be plotting ways to go back. I know I am.

For more information about the USM SLIS courses, visit the URLs below. If you have any questions, e-mail me at lbdodd@crimson.ua.edu.

<http://www.usm.edu/slis/British.htm>

http://www.usm.edu/internationaledu/ip_1/britain_bsp_main.htm

<http://laurenlondonlibraries.blogspot.com/>



Lauren Dodd takes advantage of a mini-break from her studies to visit the Louvre Museum.