

I wrote this in December 1996, as a tongue-in-cheek handout, for the colloquium event for academics and Probation senior managers hosted that month by the Probation Studies Unit (PSU), as my secondment (one of the first two ever) was drawing to a close that month.

IT'S JOLLY GOOD BEING A FELLOW!

Andrew Bridges answers some searching questions about being seconded to the Probation Studies Unit at Oxford: *Why, How, Where, When and What*

Why did you apply for a Fellowship?

a) Stated reason: ACOP had two years running turned down the research proposal put forward by its Employment Working Group, so this seemed a good way of getting that research done, and I would also be in at the beginning of a completely new venture which is the PSU.

b) Real reason: I rather fancied the prospect of the languid academic life: some space to read some books, some browsing through the Bodleian Library, some earnest analytical discussion in elegant seminar rooms, some views over the dreaming spires (shutting out the screaming tyres), some afternoons watching cricket in The Parks, some stylish eating and drinking, and anything else life in Oxford had to offer.

Why did your Committee agree?

I've noticed that it has occurred to a number of candidates for Fellowships that if you can persuade your Committee to manage without you for several months there is a risk they might persuade themselves they can do without you forever. I certainly thought it was necessary to engage the support of my Chief Officer colleagues first, and then emphasise the benefits and minimise the costs of the secondment. In reality the tangible benefits to the employer are not huge - ultimately it is an exercise in goodwill on both sides. I requested a nine-month half-time secondment, claiming that it would fit in between CPO Malcolm's return from ACOP Chair and ACPO Paul's scheduled three-month visit to India.

How did you get accepted?

I responded to the advertisement in November 1995, and was interviewed in January by Ros Burnett and three others round a coffee table. Beware the informality! I was cross-examined more thoroughly than in most CPO* job interviews. [Chief Probation Officer]

Where did you work?

My colleague Fellow Richard Thurston and I were allocated a sizeable basement room in 12 Bevington Road. Facilities were OK, but I think that any future Fellow spending a lot of time in Oxford itself will probably expect to find their own PC on or near their desk. Being half-time, I went to Oxford to work (taking a portable Notebook computer) about twice a week for the first three months, then I spent over twenty days during the next four months in eleven different Probation Services on my fieldwork and started doing the written work from home. The physical link with Oxford is important in my view, in order to be seen as a team member of the Unit, and not just a consumer of its benefits.

When did you work?

Being full-time, Richard came up from Wales weekly, and weekday accommodation was found for him. I was in some ways more fortunate to be able to travel daily from Reading, which enabled the half-time arrangement to work in practice. I scheduled a different pair of days

each week for Oxford work, balancing the needs of the two jobs as best I could. I have a system for monitoring the hours I work, and what they are spent on, and this can be analysed with reference to the number of working days in a given period - basically I have during the first eight months averaged over eleven hours per day in total, with about seven and a half going on BPS work and three and a half going on Oxford work. I will still be writing up my project at home during the first two or three months of 1997. [NB It took me until Jan 1998]

What was the Fellowship like in practice?

a) Project: Hard work, especially as with so much goodwill from every Probation Service I approached I ended up with a very much larger set of data than I had originally anticipated. I am very appreciative of the warm reception and co-operation I had from each of the Services involved, and also of the extra help given to me with data entry by the PSU. Becoming more computer-literate has been a major extra benefit for me from this Fellowship.

b) Lifestyle: Enjoyable! Seminars at All Souls' and St John's Colleges have been both elegant and stimulating (another world!), staff at Bevington Road have been hospitable and helpful (entailing visits to some other Colleges), and there have been some nice pints in some good pubs. Richard found some interesting museums, including a piece of a dodo, and he also found most of the decent pubs.

I missed all the cricket, however, and I think that in reality I have read no more books this year than I would normally - i.e. very few indeed. I've hardly been in the Bodleian at all, or any other Library except the one in Bevington Road itself. (When I originally registered at the Bodleian on 1 April I had to take an oath not to kindle any fires in the Library - but I'm told this is a requirement on other days of the year too - and I got a funny look from the ancient Registrar until I explained that "Probation Fellow" was a reference to my subject matter and not my status ...)

Oxford is of course a pleasingly elegant city, and the older Colleges especially so, but it's a salutary reminder of the residual privilege and power still exercised by inherited wealth and the class system in this country - and most of the time I've enjoyed it!

12 Bevington Road accommodates the Centre for Criminological Research in a very large semi-detached house, and the PSU is a Unit within it, so I met researchers from around the world working on a range of projects - a rewarding experience in itself.

The unstructured yet methodical and convention-bound academic world was curiously difficult to adjust to for me, but I have been hugely impressed by the universally assiduous labours of all the colleagues I have worked with - in terms of long hours in the office and at home. People do take quite a lot of time to talk to each other - which I have appreciated - but there seems to be much less of a boundary between work and home than I normally see around me in the Probation world. They seem to do almost all their own day-to-day secretarial and admin. work, and I don't know how they get their reading done. I've learned a great deal from all of them.

c) Summary: Hard work. Enjoyable. Recommended.

Andrew Bridges

Visiting Probation Studies Fellow, April - December 1996