

CONVERSATION GROUP

NEWCOMERS' CLUB

INTRODUCTION

This booklet provides accounts from a range of discussions we have had in our Conversation Group over the past five years. They are not in chronological order, so as to give a sense of the diversity of people attending and the topics discussed.

We have been running the Group, together, since 2013, and meet every Thursday in term time between 10.30 am and 12.00 pm. Anyone can come along, preferably if English is not their first language. We usually have a theme for the week which is announced beforehand. If there are more than eight people, or if some people have only recently arrived and are not confident in speaking English, we might divide into small groups with one person acting as “scribe”.

Although themes like health, education, food or elections are discussed each year, every conversation is different. Each participant brings his or her own experience and presents an individual perspective. We learn new and surprising information about each other’s countries, cultures, traditions and daily life. Our preconceived perceptions and stereotypes are frequently challenged.

However the Conversation Group is also a place for recognising shared experiences; for example, losing a favourite pet when you are a child (“animals in your country” is a popular theme); how to please both sides of the family when arranging your wedding; juggling parenthood with a career; and concerns about elderly parents when you are far from home. And for many, worries about the future direction of your country under a new political regime.

We welcome babies and small children who can provide a distraction for those lacking in confidence or when the discussion becomes too serious!

The Conversation Group is also a place for sharing information about Oxford and life in the UK: how to find free English classes, toddler groups, the cheapest rail tickets, the freshest fish and how to book accommodation in other university towns, among other things.

We feel it is a privilege to meet with such a resourceful, friendly and enterprising group of people every week, and we hope you enjoy dipping into this booklet which Valeria Power has prepared with such care.

Dorothy Whittington and Theresa Frayn

NEW MEMBERS at the beginning of the academic year

It was exciting to welcome participants from China, Denmark, France, Japan, Poland, Russia, Spain, Switzerland and Turkey.

First each person introduced themselves to the person next to them, who then introduced them to the whole group. Tamer is an academic from Turkey; his subject is Social Policy. While in the UK he wants to set up a business. Takuya, originally from Japan, worked in Software while he and his wife lived in Salt Lake City, USA. He appreciates the slow pace of life in Oxford and would like to find work in a library. Mai and Nariko, also from Japan, both work in health-related professions. Mai is a hospital administrator and Nariko helps groups of doctors and other health workers set up medical practices. Wakako is a judge in Japan, is finding Oxford more peaceful than Tokyo and is enjoying spending more time with her children, both at school here. Tina also brought her children here from Odense, birthplace of Hans Christian Andersen in Denmark. (Most had heard of Hans Christian Andersen; his fairy stories are particularly popular in Japan.) Fredrik, 10, and Sofi, 7, are not attending school here as, sadly, they're here for just two months, when Tina will return to her job as an Economics Consultant to the elderly.

Denise's daughter would not come to Oxford without the family's ginger cat. Her son chose to remain in Lausanne, (Switzerland) with neither cat nor family for company, because he's so enjoying his work as a hospital nurse. Nadya's horses were too big to bring to Oxford from her native Russia, where she works as a riding instructor. She has a degree in agricultural engineering and didn't study English because she never thought she'd have the opportunity to speak it, never imagining 3 or 4 years in Oxford!

Celia from Seville has left her two older children, one at University, one on an Erasmus programme in France (sadly English students will soon be missing out on these opportunities after Brexit!). She is enjoying spending more time with her younger two children in Oxford. She teaches Spanish at the International School in Culham one day a week, a change from working full time teaching English to Spanish children!

Julia from Poland is here with her two sons, but will, like Celia, soon be a mother of four. She always wanted a daughter, her sons another brother. The twins are arriving around Christmas time. Julia studied Chinese in Poland and Shanghai, where she lived for two years. She is a fashion buyer, from Taiwan and Bangladesh as well as China. Claire from France also has two boys and is an International Trade advisor.

In China there is a huge gap between opportunities for young people in the sophisticated towns and those remaining in the countryside, who are brought up in small villages by grandparents who have had little education while their parents work in the cities. Lin Yuan, from Shanghai, works for an NGO which raises funds to train teachers to work in these villages so that these deprived children can have a better start in life. In her spare time she's a story teller in Shanghai's public libraries.

What an interesting group of people! You may have noticed that partners and spouses hardly figured in the conversations. It is lovely to know how much the children

have settled into the Oxford Primary and Secondary schools. Claire and Julia commented on the fact that school finishes so early. How do working mothers cope? In China children are met by grandparents, apparently. In Switzerland children need to be met at midday for a home cooked lunch. This conversation will be continued next week.

Also next week we'll be asking for first impressions of Oxford, if you've arrived for the first time, or has it changed if it is a second visit. What has been the biggest surprise? What has concerned or puzzled you?

LIFE IN OXFORD

Holland, Israel, (briefly) Italy, Japan, Russia and Spain were represented by our members last week, our final session. People shared their feelings and experiences of life in Oxford. It was a shame that Shaked, a past member of Conversation Group, could not stay to give us the benefit of how she felt about her years in Oxford. 18 month old Adam had other ideas and who can blame him on such a lovely day?

Do you think of Oxford as home?

Some Newcomers would like to make Oxford their home. Megu and her daughter, who loves her school and has become a Christian, are not looking forward to their return to Japan. Others are happy to come for a year or two, seeing it as a “one off” experience, an extended holiday. One participant sees Italy as home, although she's spent many years in Spain with her Spanish husband and sons. Oxford has been a great experience for them all. What is it like for Newcomers, who think they're coming here for a year or two, when their partners are offered an extended contract or even a permanent job? I always admire their willingness to be flexible, which should never be taken for granted; it must be hard to leave your friends, family and your own career prospects to follow your partner's career.

What is it like to live in Oxford?

It is a small, accessible city, especially on a bike, which you can now hire, if you're brave enough to ride an unfamiliar one on the “wrong” side of the road. If you want to own a bike look on Gum Tree, or OUNC Meet-ups, of course! How safe is cycling? Drivers here are more considerate and polite than those in Spain or Italy, apparently!

Summer in Oxford

For £4 you can swim in the outdoor pool at Hinksey; the water is surprisingly warm, so I'm told. Swimming in the river Thames, near Port Meadow, is free, of course. If you enjoy summer fruit you can “Pick Your Own” at two farms near Oxford. It is still more economical for farmers to allow families to come and pick strawberries, raspberries, and other fruit, even if a few are eaten before the weighing takes place, than hire workers.

Things to do when it's raining

Of course, there are the museums and colleges to look round, but the Westgate Shopping Centre is particularly popular with Newcomers and their visiting relatives even if local residents try to avoid it. That said, I notice many of us benefited from warm, light, shower and windproof coats which we bought in Uniqlo last winter and early Spring!

College dinners

Our Spanish participant loves the formality of College dinners. He was a bit confused at first; the aperitif, was drunk in one room, the three course meal to be accompanied by an excellent choice of wines in the Dining Hall, followed by port in yet another room. This will be a wonderful memory from his time in Oxford!

So what are the problems of living here?

The difficulty of finding accommodation in the first place, and the high rents you're expected to pay, can be an unwelcome surprise for those initially excited by the

prospect of coming here. Others have found connecting to the Internet a complicated and expensive process, and the connection is often slow or unreliable.

Speaking English

Japanese children are taught English in Secondary School but the emphasis is on grammar and punctuation so it is in Oxford that their pronunciation is put to the test. On the whole, people in shops, cafes and on buses are patient. English spelling is very inconsistent. (The boy threw the ball through the window is an obvious example.) "I try to apply the rules but sometimes I am unlucky", said our Russian member.

Racism

No one has encountered racist attitudes in Oxford itself, but in other parts of the UK you can feel less welcome, after Brexit. Japan seems the least racist of the countries represented, perhaps because politeness is so highly valued there. If you asked a Japanese person the way, and they couldn't understand you, they would be embarrassed, but not tell you to go back to your own country, which might well be said in certain parts of the UK.

What are the causes of racism?

Is it a natural reaction to people who are different? Are immigrants seen as a threat because they are "taking our jobs" and benefiting from our Education and Health Services? Is there a feeling that the liberal cultures of countries like Holland and Scandinavia are threatened by the influx people of a different culture? Are we all guilty of "racial stereotyping?" Young British people have acquired a reputation for heavy drinking and shouting loudly at restaurant owners and bar staff to "make them understand" when on holiday abroad. So it was interesting to learn that Russians have a similar reputation in Turkey and Spanish and Italians also "let their hair down" on holiday. The opposite is true of the Dutch who have a reputation for hard work, a huge advantage when they're applying for jobs in Australia, apparently!

How can we tackle racism?

Confront stereotyping and generalising by giving people the opportunity to mingle! Primary Schools in Oxford encourage children to celebrate and respect different cultures and religions. Racial discrimination is against the law in this country, but sadly in parts of the UK people are not as open minded or tolerant as they are here and our government has recently been guilty of arresting and threatening to deport people who have lived here decades but lacked some official documents to prove their right to citizenship.

MARKETS AROUND OXFORD

Newcomers from Germany, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Korea, Malaysia and Switzerland came to our meeting on Thursday. Many in the group had left an interesting occupation (such as managing building sites) as well as friends and family to come and settle in Oxford. Fortunately their impressions so far have been favourable!

Accommodation is very expensive, but shopping is cheaper than expected. Someone asked about markets; there is Gloucester Green on Wednesdays, and local markets at weekends in East Oxford, Headington and Summertown. The fish market off Botley Road is open every day, apparently. Many things are free, including the museums, parks, playgrounds, and, most importantly, a visit with a sick child to A and E. It was good to hear from those with children how happy they are in their primary schools, especially when English is not their first language.

We started a discussion about Healthcare. It is always interesting to hear how this is organised and paid for in other countries, so this will be next week's theme. But we hope you'll share more of your experiences of life in Oxford especially any difficulties you encounter or anything which puzzles you.

IMPRESSIONS OF LIFE IN OXFORD

Last Thursday members of the group came from Catalonia, China, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Japan, the Netherlands, Russia and Turkey.

Our first discussion was centred round impressions of life in Oxford.

On the negative side, Newcomers were surprised at the high cost of accommodation, especially in the city centre where properties are not always clean or well managed. They were shocked at the number of people sleeping on the streets; homelessness is often the result of a shortage of low cost accommodation. It is impossible to apply for a job (or open a bank account, make a doctor's appointment or borrow a library book!) without proof of an address, which makes it hard for the homeless to return to a "normal" life.

Public transport can be expensive; the fact that there are many different bus and train companies make it difficult to find out about special offers and day passes, for example. Sometimes it seems that cars have priority over pedestrians and it is impossible to walk along the narrow pavement beside your partner or friends. The weather is unpredictable; last Thursday Rezeda felt she was back in Russia which she'd left eight years ago for sunny Spain!

But hopefully the positive aspects of Oxford far outweigh the negative! It is a peaceful and family friendly city; Newcomers' children settle happily into Oxford's primary and secondary schools. People are polite and respectful towards each other and know how to form orderly queues at bus stops and supermarket checkouts.

There is a wide variety of restaurants, from the point of view of price and ethnicity; food in the UK is better than expected! There are many opportunities to take courses, join special interest and social groups, make friends and improve one's spoken English. Oxford is a beautiful city with its historic buildings, numerous parks, gardens and open spaces. It is surrounded by attractive countryside.

We then discussed future topics for the Conversation Group. Some thought it would be helpful if the first sessions of Michaelmas Term could be devoted to sharing problems like how to open a bank account or make a doctor's appointment when your child is ill. It is useful to know in advance what the theme is going to be each week because you can prepare your contribution and the vocabulary. Food and recipes are always popular topics! When there are more than ten in the group it's better to discuss the topic in twos or threes. No one really wants to learn grammar at Conversation Group but it's always useful to learn some typical English expressions and idioms.

WHAT TO DO IN OXFORD

China, Germany, Japan and Turkey were represented by our members today, ten adults (including Topaz) and four delightful children.

As we had two new members the theme became “What to do in and around Oxford”. We talked about the programme of planned visits and those who had been here since last year described which tours they had enjoyed most and why. Being able to see parts of buildings not usually open to the public and having an informative guide who is happy to answer questions, make the visits memorable. The walking tour of Oxford, the Bodleian Library tour and the Town Hall are not to be missed when they are repeated next academic year!

Next Friday is the Newcomers’ first visit to the Oxford Playhouse and I know they will want to give you an amazing experience so that you’ll come and watch some of their performances! The visit to Filkins Village was so popular last year that it is bound to fill up quickly once rumours of the delicious homemade lunch circulate, and to visit Corpus Christi College as it celebrates the 500th anniversary is indeed a unique experience. If you would like to book write to newcomersbookings@gmail.com to reserve your place. The booking secretary will tell you when and how to pay for your ticket. The money for the tours goes towards a donation to the institution and a token for the guide. Any surplus goes towards the free events organised by the Newcomers’ Club.

Besides the tours advertised in the Programme, which have been booked months ahead, you need to look out for the visits which come under the title of Explore Oxfordshire. Jenny Turner organises Garden Tours, Shelley Hoffman beautiful walks and Maria Lock visits to Antique Centres. These tours are much appreciated because you go to places inaccessible by public transport, with friendly volunteer drivers who go out of their way to point out features on the journey.

I had raided the Information Centre in Broad Street before the meeting and looking at all the leaflets led to a discussion of which places in and around Oxford are inexpensive and child friendly! Besides the numerous parks and playgrounds the museums have many activities for children; the Ashmolean has a “Live Friday” late evening event each month which is really popular with young people and families.

Next week members wanted to share suggestions of places to visit in the UK. I know many Newcomers are brilliant at finding cheap train fares and places to stay, so please come and tell us about the towns you’ve visited. It would also be interesting to hear about the popular holiday destinations in your own countries!

FIRST WEEK IN OXFORD

Members of the Conversation Group discussed what shocked, impressed or surprised them during their first weeks in Oxford, before moving on to the topic of weddings.

Pleasant surprises and impressions included the parks and "nature" which is lacking in large Chinese cities, the historic buildings (older than anything in Finland), free museums and traditions (especially St Giles Fair) and the diversity of Oxford's population. The state primary schools are particularly helpful to children who don't yet speak English. Fresh fruit and vegetables are cheaper than in Japan. Most people are friendly and helpful. One Chinese member was amazed that someone came to his house to sort out a problem with his computer; in China he would have to take it to a shop to be repaired.

More challenging surprises are the variety of British accents; some people are quite hard to understand if you only listened to "standard" English voices when learning it at school. Driving or biking on the left seems strange to all but Japanese Newcomers, and the cost of even short bus journeys seems very high. Repair services in the home are not always efficient. One member who has lived here some time says the workmen sent by the letting agency often do not sort out the leaking pipes. Now when she contacts them they say "Oh it's you, Mrs Problem!"

We had less time to share experiences of weddings. However, all were fascinated by the photographs of Dorothy's daughter's wedding and the stories she told about the occasion, which took place in her daughter's old school, Stowe, in 1996. Dorothy had ordered and paid for (over the phone) the two bridesmaids' dresses by a particular designer she admired, without even seeing them! (One needed a bit of adjusting with safety pins but you'd never guess from the photos.) A week before the wedding, when she was choosing a dress for herself, Dorothy saw and heard a group of buskers in the street outside. "Do you perform at special occasions?" she asked. "Would you be free next weekend to play at our daughter's wedding?" They were actually music students, and were happy to dress up and delight the 200 guests, among whom were two Japanese students who had travelled from Japan to be at their teacher's wedding.

Next Thursday is a few days before Hallowe'en so that will be the theme. Do you know the origins of the festival? Is it celebrated in your country? We enjoyed having small people and babies in the group last week and as it's half term older children are welcome too. There will be plenty of paper and crayons if they're feeling creative.

VIEWS ON OXFORD

These opinions are strictly anonymous - unlike the Queen's and our [now former] prime minister, David Cameron!

Our small group loved the green spaces of Oxford, the free access to museums, the kindness of the English to children and the freedom to bicycle everywhere.

Not so popular were the high rents, the difficulty of getting GP appointments, and the reluctance of the GPs to engage with patients (e.g. examine them), and sometimes, their distaste for prescribing antibiotics.

What our group found puzzling is the numbering on lifts (1st floor is not ground floor in the UK), the different plumbing systems, and, for the Japanese, the very different way of washing up the dishes, i.e. not using running water.

We finished our session with a lively discussion on gender roles in different countries, and a question posed to Theresa and me: "How have we managed to survive such long marriages?" We tried to persuade them that we always agreed with everything our husbands said - but I don't think they believed us!

Last week the Conversation Group talked about the surprises and difficulties experienced in the UK so far. Positive and negative surprises were told, positive ones being the helpful British people and the smile that seems to appear in British people's faces when you meet them on the Thames Path. Surprisingly the public transport here is quite expensive, which we all dislike, and some find it difficult to handle that visitors do not take their shoes off when they enter your home.

Other difficulties we talked about were the bad weather and the supermarkets being not open 24/7. A big problem we also discussed deeply were the hot and cold water taps being separated, which makes it hard to use them in a 'normal' way. This week, we'll be looking at restaurant meals and talking about the different prices, tipping and dealing with various problems, etc. Do bring menus with you, if you would like to.

ELECTIONS PART 1

China, Iran, Poland and Turkey were represented at our meeting last Thursday and the theme was Elections, because Spain had held elections last Sunday. In Britain all elections are held on a Thursday, and last week local elections, for some county and city councils, were taking place that very day. These local elections often reflect how people feel about the government of the party which is in power; last Thursday's were no exception as you might have noticed in our national media. Celia was not present to tell us about Spain's results. (She had been concerned about the rise of new parties, particularly the far right, but actually they did not gain as many seats as predicted.)

In China no one gets excited about elections, according to our Chinese Newcomers. There are elections to choose those who have responsibility for running local affairs but they don't attract publicity. Those in government are not elected by anything recognisable as a democracy and our members felt there was no point in voting. They come from military or wealthy families high up in the Communist Party. No ordinary people would believe it's possible to have any influence over government policy.

Iran holds presidential elections and now has elections every 4 years. There are usually seven candidates to choose from but they mostly promote the same policies. The Iranian Newcomer hasn't voted for many years. She and her immediate family divide their time between France and the UK, but last year was the first one in which they hadn't visited her relatives who still live there. Back in 1973, there were women judges and women had more say in government. Now there are few women in public life.

The current President of Poland has given himself extra powers including choosing the country's judges who will be able to decide if the outcome of an election is legal or not. This is extremely unpopular with those who care about democracy and the country's future prosperity. However, among those from poorer rural areas, he has many supporters because of his generous hand-outs to unemployed families with many children. Where is this money coming from? "Families consume and the country doesn't develop." His policies are divisive as well as short sighted.

The Turkish President, Erdogan, has tried to ensure he stays in office by altering the Constitution. Until 2014 the people voted for the party and the party elected their leader from among their number. Now the President is elected directly by the people, he is not answerable to any political party. He is more popular in the countryside where people are poorer and believe his promises that is the reason why he was elected. However, in the most recent regional elections, his opponents won control in large cities like Istanbul and Ankara, the country's capital. Erdogan is disputing these election results which challenge his authority.

Last week Denise described how Switzerland is governed. It is divided into cantons each of which is autonomous and has its own education system. It can be disruptive for children if their parents have to move for work, for example, and they are faced with an unfamiliar curriculum. Each canton sends representatives to the lower and upper House of Parliament. Many issues are decided by a people's referendum. There are four main political parties and no president or prime minister, so everything has to be negotiated, which means changes happen slowly but it is a very stable country. (Perhaps we'd all like to live under a similar regime!)

We agreed to have a less serious theme next week. Please bring a game, or be prepared to describe a game which is popular in your country.

GAMES PART 1

Our members came from Brazil, China, Poland, Switzerland and Turkey. The theme was popular or traditional games in the countries represented.

Traditionally Backgammon was the most popular game in Turkey, but now it is mainly played by old men, and shopkeepers who are waiting around for customers. Mah-jong is still popular in China, often played in outdoor cafes and parks, but Poker is played throughout the country for money. Jason will teach us the rules when he comes back from his holiday (start saving your pounds and pennies now!)

I had always believed that Monopoly was a particularly British game but every country seems to have its own version where property is bought and sold in its capital or other well-known city. There is actually an Oxford version which you could buy in Boswells to remind you of your days here when you return to your own country. And Scrabble? Lin thought it could only be played in English speaking countries, but no, in Turkey and Poland there are versions which include the accented letters unique to those languages. But designing a Chinese version would be impossible.

Well, the highlight of the morning was Dorothy teaching us Bridge, a game for 4 players, each of whom is dealt 13 cards. You play with a partner, with whom you are not allowed to communicate (verbally), and you have to make more 'tricks' than the other pair of players. She and her husband Richard partner each other at different clubs in Oxford and London (and they're still together after what I believe to be 60 years of marriage.) Twice a year Richard plays for money in a London club, but not Dorothy, too risky, perhaps. Ursula, Denise, Yuksel, Lin and Kaiyan, our new member from China, learnt quickly. When Yuksel first joined a legal team in Turkey, the older lawyers suggested he learn Bridge as a useful social skill. He and his generation weren't interested but now he wishes he had taken that advice as it is such an absorbing game.

This has been a quick report to write so next week, more games, by popular request! It would be great if anyone could bring Mah-jong, Backgammon or any other game to share. I'll bring dice, pens and paper. Those who aren't playing Bridge can learn Sevens, Beetle and Categories, and Lin will borrow her son's war game, in which each side has a different colour so you don't need to recognise the Chinese characters. I will only have to report on which games were played, who played well and who played brilliantly. (No winners or losers at Conversation Group!)

NEWS, POLITICAL PARTIES AND RELIGION

Last week I had brought in games to play, cards, paper and pencils, and Pickup Sticks, because it was half term and I thought we could all have a holiday from serious talking and I could have a holiday from writing. But our members from Italy, Japan, Russia and Spain thought that was too frivolous, and there were so many questions raised that I had difficulty trying to summarise all the ideas which were expressed.

Who decides what goes in the news?

Our Russian participant began by criticising the media coverage (and possibly mine last week) of the nerve agent attack in Salisbury. Like Yulia Skripal, he did not believe the Russian Government was responsible; he could support his opinion with facts. However, he does admire the British newspapers' criticism of domestic policies which is not possible in the Russian press. In Spain, the problems between Madrid and Catalonia dominate the Press but our representative feels that these are exaggerated. It suits the government to focus on this rather than corrupt ministers and Spain's huge economic and social problems. There are only four national newspapers in Japan and they tend to support the government.

Can you have too many political parties?

In Japan there are two main parties, one moderate, and one more right wing. Is this because there is less inequality between rich and poor in Japan? Do Socialist parties tend to grow up when the gap between rich and poor increases? "Spain is a mess" with far too many parties, apparently, and the same can be said of Italy.

Are all taxation systems the same?

Last week I reported that taxation in Japan is 8%. That is a flat tax applied to everything you buy, including food and clothes, which hits less well-off families. But the right wing government is going to raise it to 10%. Income tax, as in most countries, rises according to what you earn. In Russia it starts at 13% of your income, in the UK 20%.

Immigration and Religion

Shintoism and Buddhism are the main religions of Japan, but some couples do like to find a Christian church in which to marry. Religion is not a cause for conflict in Japan. Not many Muslims have settled in Japan, in fact, it has few non-Japanese residents. At one time, Spain was ruled by the Moors, but many converted to Christianity at the time of the Inquisition, apparently. Spain must now "get used to Muslims again" as it has many settlers from North Africa as well as refugees from the Middle East. All agreed that Islam should not be blamed for recent terrorist attacks as it is a peaceful religion. Its influence on art, science, technology and law has not been appreciated by Western cultures. All religions are now encouraged in Russia. All those present agreed that it is good to live in a city or country that has a positive and welcoming approach to those from other parts of the world.

POLITICS, WEDDINGS, BREXIT AND MORE

China, Japan, Spain and Italy were represented by our members. As usual, a wide range of topics was discussed.

Thursday's Times Newspaper

"Who is Yulia Skripal?" Today's papers showed pictures of Yulia Skripal who had come to visit her father, a former Russian double agent who had settled in the quiet English city of Salisbury. They were both found unconscious, on a park bench, on March 4th, having been the victims of a nerve agent attack. Thank goodness she has left hospital and her father has nearly recovered. We tried to imagine what it would be like if a similar attack happened in Oxford and the city centre had to be cordoned off, and fumigated, for weeks. Yulia eventually wants to return to Russia. She says she doesn't blame President Putin for the attack. (I'm afraid everyone else seems to!)

"Who is the Italian Prime Minister?"

The fact that Italy now has a Law Professor with no political experience is of concern to our Italian participant. He was chosen to represent the 5 Star Movement which is a party of protest against Italy's establishment and inequality, and the very right wing party, The League. One issue they may agree on is immigration. So many migrants have crossed the Mediterranean from Libya and South Saharan Africa in recent years (some expressed the view that the problems which cause the migration crisis are historic, caused by European interference and exploitation). Although many Italians have responded with compassion and practical help, the problem is overwhelming if routes to other, wealthier European countries are blocked.

Weddings, Royal and otherwise

"Who watched the Royal wedding?" To Dorothy, watching her granddaughter receive her MA in Cambridge, was understandably more important than watching the Royal Wedding. Most of those present had enjoyed the spectacle but not watched it all the way through. "Will Meghan Markle automatically be a British Citizen?" Many British people would find it hard to answer some of the questions in the written Citizenship Test given to immigrants, so let's hope she's spared that embarrassment. She is also allowed to avoid the embarrassment of meeting Donald Trump, whom she has described as a misogynist. The question of who pays for weddings was raised. In the UK, couples (often helped by parents) spend a fortune, money which might be better spent on a deposit for a house, perhaps. In China, weddings are less elaborate than here because parents feel it's their duty to buy a home and a car for their child. Our Chinese representative felt the money would be better spent on education or travel, to broaden their son's or daughter's mind.

Brexit

"Why was the country so divided in the way it voted?" Towns and cities where many EU citizens are already living and working (especially in hospitals, care homes and research establishments) voted to remain. In other parts of the country where there is poverty and unemployment some people feel resentful or suspicious of foreigners whom they feel are "taking our jobs". In these areas they also listened to propaganda which stated that if we left the EU there would be £300 million a week to spend on the National Health Service. If only!

Accommodation in Oxford

“Is it more expensive to live here than in other countries?” Accommodation in Japanese cities is also expensive, but people pay less tax, only 8% compared with 20% in this country, so have more disposable income for housing. It was embarrassing to learn, some weeks ago, that one member of our group, living in a brand new flat had no hot water for four days because no one could identify the problem with the boiler. Another said her family had no hot water for a week during the Christmas period! Oxford rents are particularly high because the universities and hospitals are continually expanding. There is always a shortage of accommodation as it's a comparatively small city.

FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT

There is a programme on Radio 4 called "From our Own Correspondent" in which British journalists report from the country in which they are currently living. That would be a good title for last Thursday's meeting of the Conversation Group.

Japan

Yesterday was the 23rd anniversary of the Kobe Earthquake. Miyo was born in this city and, as a 5 year old, experienced the terror of the quake itself as well as being hungry and cold in the aftermath. Mai lived nearby; it is part of her early memories too. Every anniversary is marked by prayers for the souls of the 6500 people who died.

Japan, China and North Korea

Matsuno comes from Fukuoka in Kyushu, just across the sea from North Korea. Those who live there are worried about whether they will be attacked by that country's missiles. Lu Yu says that in the past China had good relations with North Korea, especially as the Chinese government provided so much food aid during famines, but now they do not see Kim Jon Un as a reliable ally.

China

On a lighter note, there has been a rapid change in the use of phones in China's big cities. You can use your phone to pay for anything! There is no longer need for cash or even a credit card when you shop, travel by bus, train or taxi, or order online. Jack Ma, a former teacher, is perhaps the person most responsible for this lifestyle revolution. He founded Internet companies including Alibaba, the Chinese equivalent of Amazon, and is, incidentally, the richest man in China.

Mexico

Elizabeth spoke about the elections taking place in Mexico this summer. The current finance minister is leaving his role to stand for the right wing PRI party. The left wing Morena Party is led by Andres Lopez Obrador, who is standing for the third time. The centrist party, PAN, may choose Margareta Zovala as their candidate. If she's chosen, and elected, she will be Mexico's first female president. Whoever is elected it is important they remind President Trump that the US needs Mexican workers and he should think carefully before deporting them and building his wall.

Costa Rica and Chile

Amilia is from Costa Rica, which will also hold elections in 2018, but she works as a psychologist in Chile where the visit of the Pope is causing great excitement. His support of the poor and for Human Rights is popular in this Catholic country, but it's a pity he's from Argentina; there has been tension between these countries for many decades.

Germany

Carla reported that people are relieved that Angela Merkel has reached an agreement to form a coalition government, as for months it seemed as if the country was ungoverned! However there is frustration alongside the relief as nothing will change. There is anxiety about health issues. No long term provision has been planned for the increasing numbers of elderly people, many of whom retired in their sixties and may live into their eighties. Neither are there long term plans for the huge numbers of refugees

who were welcomed by Germany in 2016. Many have adapted well to life in Germany, but some single, uneducated refugees feel they have nothing to lose by stealing from German citizens who seem, to those who have little, so wealthy. Angela Merkel must listen to her citizens and concentrate more on domestic than foreign policy if she wishes to be re-elected as German Chancellor.

Indonesia

In Jakarta, Indonesia, some students visiting the Stock Exchange last Monday had a nasty surprise when the floor they were standing on collapsed. They were among the 70 people injured. According to Mirda, it is a “fancy modern building”; perhaps more attention had been given to its appearance than its safety! Oka had happier news. The population of the Sumatran elephant has steadily declined over the last 25 years due to the expansion of palm oil plantations, as well as forest fires. The species has been identified as critically endangered. But in recent days a baby elephant’s footprint has been identified. Let us hope he or she grows up in safety and that they have siblings somewhere in the forest!

Next week our topic will be Education. Are there government and private schools in your country? Do you have to pay to go to University? Was your parents education very different from yours?

SPORTS

Last Thursday our members came from China, Germany, Hungary, Japan, Spain and Turkey. We began by sharing thoughts about Monday's bombing in Manchester, as we intended to respect the one minute silence at 11.0 am. Newcomers had been asked by friends at home whether the British were scared to go out but the feelings throughout the country are not of fear but of sadness, defiance and solidarity with the communities so deeply affected.

The countries represented had all been affected by terrorism, in recent years, except Japan and Hungary. Passengers on a train in Madrid, and at Kun Ming Station in China, families at a Christmas Market in Berlin, New Year's Eve partygoers at a night club in Turkey, all had been victims of terrorist attacks in recent years. Such events often bring people together, which is not the aim of terrorism. Ordinary people often perform heroic acts to protect others; firefighters and medical staff work tirelessly to save lives. Citizens are ready to donate their blood as well as their money after such incidents. We are all happy to have our bags checked at airports and, in China and Spain, at stations, and never to leave our luggage unattended. The group expressed sympathy for the vast majority of Muslims who hate the fact that acts of terror are perpetrated in the name of their religion and can themselves feel threatened as a result.

We intended sport to be the topic for the week. Dr Richard Whittington told us about his experience of sport at his school where twice daily attendance at chapel and on the games' field was compulsory. Military training was part of the regime and many boys may have prayed for games sessions to be cancelled due to bad weather, when in chapel. Richard says the main changes in sporting activities since he was young were the fact that most traditionally male sports, including boxing, cricket and Rugby football are now played by women.

Sport is hugely important in China, where there are many options, dancing, martial arts and athletics in schools, with girls and boys always taught separately, as they are in Japan, where American sports like Baseball are popular. In Turkey football, volleyball and basketball (where their team are world champions) are played. Fencing is popular. In Spain and Germany, sports lessons are taught in school for every age group.

Next week our subject for discussion is pets! Are you missing a dog or cat while you are here in the UK or did you bring it/them with you? What is the general attitude to animals in your country?

VOTING

Representatives from China, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands and Turkey took part in our discussion about elections. There was interest in the UK's vote to leave European Union, and sadness too, because it was an institution which symbolised cooperation among countries which had recently been at war.

Anxiety was expressed about the rise of the far right in some countries, but relief that Geert Wilders was defeated in the Netherlands and, more recently, Marine Le Pen in France. The right wing AFD, Alternative fur Deutschland, is popular in parts of Germany where they feel they have been neglected (rather like areas in the UK which voted for Brexit) but it only has representatives at local level, not in the German Parliament. Angela Merkel will probably be re-elected as Chancellor in September's elections.

In Turkey "everyone has become political" with half the population strongly supporting President Erdogan's reforms of the constitution and the other half strongly against him. From age 19, "It is your right and your responsibility" to vote in elections. In Japan you can vote from the age of 18. You vote for representatives of a political party and it is not till after the election that the Prime Minister is selected from the party which got most votes.

In the Netherlands the Green Party has a big influence on the country's environmental policies, in particular, less dependence on fossil fuels, for industry and for the home, and making it easy to cycle everywhere.

Our new Chinese member said that although they all learned about elections in Middle School as an adult you realise that "It's all been decided already" and "elections just aren't on our agenda."

In the UK you can vote from 18. Elections here are, unlike anywhere else in the world, held on a Thursday. Polling Stations, usually a community centre or school, are within walking distance of most people's homes and open from 7am to 10pm. (Children are delighted when their school is used as it means it an unscheduled holiday!) Rarely do more than 75% of people vote, for the rest "it is just not on their agenda". They feel nothing will change for them whichever party is in power. Some people feel strongly that when you vote it is because you believe they are the right person for the job, so it is dishonest to vote for someone with whom you disagree or who, you think, is incompetent. At each Polling Station volunteers sit outside to ask where you live. Later that evening those whose addresses are not ticked may be telephoned by a political party supporter to ask if they would like a lift to the Polling Station. There is always a risk that they might not vote for that party, no one has the right to ask which party you support!

NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Last Thursday topics ranged from feasting, fasting, dolphins, democracy and lost children. This is because we'd asked members to bring a newspaper article or leaflet which had "caught their eye" during the week.

We started by discussing a "Hands off Oxford City" poster, widely distributed throughout Oxford, in response to Oxfordshire County Council's proposal to abolish the City Council (and those of smaller towns) to create "a remote, unitary county council". There are fears that such a large council would be out of touch with issues that affect the City of Oxford, in particular housing and social amenities. However, Petra says that in and around her home town of Aachen, local councils have amalgamated, in the last few years. This gives them more power to make contracts with mining and other industries which benefits everyone in the community both economically and socially.

A cutting from the Times newspaper described how numbers of dolphins are dying in the seas around England. Huge French trawlers have nets strung between them in which the dolphins become entangled and can't escape. More have been killed this year than in the whole of last year, a sad fate for such harmless and intelligent creatures.

Only Angelika had seen the film "Lion" and brought a review from a German paper. It is the story of an Indian boy who, at the age of 5, travels alone on a train for a thousand miles, is adopted by a Tasmanian couple and years later finds his way home. We hope there might still be a chance to see it at the Ultimate Picture Palace; a TV screen won't do justice to the spectacular scenery. Members recalled times when they'd been lost, or lost their children. How scary this can be even if you find each other within a few minutes. Many children in India disappear, often kidnapped to work on building sites or in factories, and are never reunited with their families.

A page of pancake recipes by Nadiya is indicative of how multicultural and accepting our society has become. Nadiya, whose parents came from Bangladesh, won "The Great British Bake Off" in 2015 (having had no formal training) and was chosen to make the Queen's 90th birthday cake in 2016. She has become a household name, writing articles for magazines and cookery and children's books. She regularly appears on TV and is completing an Open University degree in her spare time.

But why pancakes? February 28th was Shrove Tuesday when traditionally pancakes were made just to use up any butter, eggs and sugar before the season of Lent, when Christians used to go without rich food for the six weeks from Ash Wednesday (March 1st) to Easter. Nowadays some people give up chocolate or alcohol during Lent; Theresa May is apparently not eating crisps. However there are members of the Greek Orthodox Church here in Oxford who, like the early Christians give up meat, eggs, fish and dairy products.

Fasting plays a large part in Hinduism. There is a particular day in the calendar when wives don't eat or drink for 24 hours "to make sure their husband has a long life". Shoba observed this on one occasion, but it made her ill. She says her husband is just as healthy as her father and brother for whom her mother and sister-in-law fast every year so she does not feel the need to repeat the experience.

Next week please could you bring a recipe from your country? It needs to be simple and the ingredients must be available in Oxford. The idea is to make it into a book. If there is enough time, perhaps you could also share ideas for places to visit in your home country as it's the time of year to be thinking about holidays.

FAMOUS OR IMPORTANT PERSON

China, Germany, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Korea, Nepal, Peru and the UK were represented at our group last Thursday. As it was half term there were even more young people than usual. We had asked members to describe a famous or important person from their country.

Nicole talked about Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor. The party she represents may be rather conservative for Nicole's taste but she respects her as a woman who is not afraid to speak her mind. Coming from East Germany she represents all Germans. Her belief in welcoming refugees, particularly from Syria was so generous, but the provisions for them were not always thought through and some communities have felt overwhelmed by the influx. It is sad that other EU countries did not cooperate in planning a strategy. Israel and the UK are the only other countries which have had a woman leader in the recent past.

Miriam introduced us to Aaron Aaronson, whom she described as Israel's first scientist. His area of research was "wild wheat". He was the first person in what is now Israel to own a car and he was allowed to travel freely because agricultural research was so important. Palestine was part of the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire at that time and Turkey supported Germany in the First World War. Aaron and a small group of friends spied on behalf of the UK. The British didn't trust them at first because they wanted no payment for their valuable information; their compatriots were anxious that Turkey might take reprisals if their espionage was discovered. Sadly this brave and intelligent man was killed in a mysterious air crash in 1919, aged 43.

Sally told us about Ma Yun, now known as Jack Ma, who was a school teacher in Hangzhou but in 1999 created China's first online marketing group, Alibaba. It is a bit like Amazon, and has subsidiaries throughout China. It has brought economic prosperity because it employs so many people and provides a market for manufactured goods. Jack Ma was invited to Trump Tower before its owner was inaugurated as president, to discuss trade relations between China and the US. He also met Theresa May at the World Economic Forum in Davos. He is China's richest man!

Daniel, (7) had some information on Isambard Kingdom Brunel who lived from 1806 to 1859. From the age of 4 his father made him practise drawing perfect circles because he wanted him to be an engineer. His first job was to help his father dig a tunnel under the Thames but he really wanted to build a fast railway from London to Bristol. First he had to walk the 100 miles to plan the straightest route. He wore a top hat, because it made him look tall and was a good place to keep his packed lunches. He could tunnel through the hills and design bridges to take the trains across rivers. But the big problem was people; they were frightened of trains and thought that travelling at speed (30 miles an hour!) might blow out your brains. As well as constructing railways, bridges, tunnels and stations, Brunel built ocean going ships. If you are in Bristol you can visit the SS Great Britain, where you can learn how he built it and what it was like to travel to Australia.

Alastair (10) from the UK talked about David Beckham. He knew everyone would have heard of his footballing career but he told us that David married Victoria, one of the Spice Girls (a famous 80s group) in 1999 and the names and ages of their four children. He retired from football in 2013. He and Victoria have always given money to help children and in 2005 he was a UNICEF ambassador. He is particularly interested in helping children who are at risk of harm.

ELECTIONS PART 2

So often when we arrive for Conversation Group the upstairs is used for a meeting but last Thursday it was a polling station. When the Presiding Officer saw us, he looked horrified and said, "What are YOU doing here?" I described the Conversation Group and he allowed us to stay in the dining room with the door shut. If we loitered on the landing, we'd be labelled "unauthorised observers" and who knows, the whole election might have been declared null and void.

This was a suitable introduction to our theme of "Elections" which were taking place throughout the UK. In England at a local level, with some cities, including London, electing a mayor, and Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland holding parliamentary elections. Dorothy and I said that in local elections we are more likely to choose the candidate we feel does most for our local community, regardless of the political party they are representing. (Others may disagree!) Did you know that Larry Sanders, whose brother Bernie was the only rival to Hilary Clinton, was a Green Party candidate in Summertown?

In Vienna there are elections for the 23 district councils every 4 years, but the main excitement at the moment is for the Presidential Elections. The candidates representing the current coalition parties have been knocked out of the competition and the two remaining candidates represent the Green Party and a new far right party. Whoever is the winner will affect the country's future in very different ways. The fences raised along Austria's borders are concerning to some citizens but strongly approved of by others.

In Japan, the way candidates present themselves in the media is all important. The media is controlled by the government and there are only six television networks. Searching the Internet is a more reliable way to find out about election candidates! The two main parties are the Liberal Democrats, very right wing, and the Democratic party, slightly less so. Only 10% of members of parliament are women.

There are elections in China every five years but nearly every candidate belongs to the main party of government; the media is the voice of government and the Internet is censored. (Youtube, Google and Facebook are banned.) You vote for delegates to represent your area. The parties representing human rights or minority rights are allowed to exist, but have no real influence. But at least 20 percent of delegates are women and people of different ethnic groups are represented.

Both of the main political parties in Costa Rica are corrupt and the performance of a new party which people hoped would fight corruption has so far been disappointing. There are local elections every seven years but the president stands for reelection every four years.

Next week we have a lighter theme. Whether you have lived here for years or only recently arrived we'd like to know what has surprised you most about life in Oxford; or what has shocked or disappointed you? What do you find puzzling?

IMMIGRATION

This week's account is again rather long, so I'm starting by announcing next week's meeting, for those who don't get to the end! But members of the Conversation Group thought it would be good to invite them to our last meeting of this term. Children who are not at school are welcome too.

Sadly last Thursday we said goodbye to Naoko who returns to Japan next week. The homemade cakes she brought were much appreciated and we wish her and her family all the best for the future.

We returned to the theme of immigration for those who weren't here on February 25th, and also because Olga had talked about the refugee crisis in Germany but not told us her own family's history. Her ancestors were part of the German community in Russia, encouraged to settle by Catherine the Great, who was herself German. Two centuries later her grandparents were sent to labour camps in Kazakhstan. The family remained in that country until they could move to Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when Olga was six. She can understand how refugees feel because it took time for her family to settle in Nuremberg, where they had no friends or relatives.

Shoko feels Japan is rather insular and few people would choose to seek asylum or emigrate there because of the language, particularly the alphabet, which makes street names unrecognisable to foreigners! The only immigrants who settle there work in highly skilled, well paid jobs.

Fueng Jiao, from China, told us that many Jews found safety in Shanghai during the Second World War. They married into Chinese families and now, if they want to emigrate to Israel the authorities there do not believe they have Jewish ancestry because of how they look. More recent immigrants to China are women from North Korea who cross the border illegally to marry Chinese farmers in remote rural areas. If they are tracked down by North Korean police they are forcibly returned and punished. However the Chinese police "turn a blind eye" and allow them to stay, knowing how bad conditions are for them in their homeland.

Karen told us that Norway has accepted 48,000 Syrian refugees who came through their border with Sweden. Many are being housed in hotels as there is not enough alternative accommodation in northern Norway and their children cause overcrowding in schools, causing some resentment among local residents. Any Norwegians who speak Arabic are being asked to act as interpreters and language teachers. Like any other immigrants to Norway they will have to learn the language and be helped to adapt to the Norwegian way of life.

Our main topic was commonly used English expressions. Members looked at the attached list and wondered what all the sayings mean and whether they exist in their own languages. "It's all gone pear shaped!" was the most puzzling phrase and no one recognised "Many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip" as having an equivalent in their language. However "Every cloud has a silver lining" has been translated word for word into Chinese, apparently, and the Japanese have an equivalent for "The grass is greener on the other side of the fence". In Spain, it is not the last straw which breaks the camel's back but the last drop that makes the glass overflow. In Germany, change "glass" for "barrel". The English would feel at home in Norway because "det regner katter og hunder" if it isn't snowing.

IMMIGRATION AND ORIGINS

Last Thursday our topic was Immigration. As well as talking about immigration in each of the countries represented, members shared their own stories about where their families originated.

In the 19th century people were leaving the state of Gujarat, in western India, because of poverty in its farming communities. Hanifah's ancestors were actually looking for Madagascar but came upon the French island of Reunion. This is where Hanifah grew up. Her great, great, great (?) grandfather reached Reunion as an 11 year old orphan, with his older brother. Together they made a living through trade, opening shops throughout the island, which was a French colony until 1946. Hanifah describes it as a very tolerant and accepting place because, as she says, "Everyone is an immigrant!" Some families still have contact with the Gujarati villages their ancestors left, and send money to build schools and health centres. This was the last time we shall see Hanifah at the Conversation Group. Although she was living in Paris for several years before coming to Oxford, and can obviously fit happily into any community, she is especially happy to have been offered a post managing an European project in Reunion and will be living near her family and childhood friends. We appreciate her contribution to our meetings, her conversation and her cookies!

The family of Sophie, our newest member, has always lived in Brussels. They can trace their roots back to the T'kint family (translated as "The Child" in Flemish) which has been well known in Belgium for centuries. She speaks French and Flemish but in Brussels itself French is the most commonly spoken language with Moroccan Arabic coming second, ahead of Flemish. In the last century, many Moroccans (as well as Spanish, Turkish and Italian people) came to work in the mines and factories around Brussels. Now many of these people, who brought their families to Belgium, are unemployed. The Belgium government has recently closed its borders to prevent the arrival of more immigrants and a situation like that in Calais, developing in Zeebrugge or its other ports.

Sergei's family has always lived in the same small area of northern Spain. But one of his ancestors had come from Asturias in the 18th century, to set up a school in his area. "Hers is my 8th surname, Awler," he told us. But, like most Spanish people, he only uses the first two, from his father, and his mother. Spanish women do not take their husband's surnames which must make it easier to trace a family's roots. Sergei has cousins in Venezuela; branches of his family settled there after the Spanish Civil War. Many families from other Latin American countries have settled in Spain, but in the last few years Peru and Ecuador have been popular destinations for young Spanish people seeking work.

Olga helped us understand the current situation in Germany since Angela Merkel accepted so many refugees. In Olga's opinion, Germany, with its healthy economy and a population of 80 million could easily accommodate a million refugees, many of whom are highly skilled and prepared to work hard. The problem is that the government has been slow to implement strategies to help the country adapt to the influx. Germany's stringent building regulations mean that building houses and blocks of flats is very expensive. So decent, low cost accommodation is hard to come by because landlords naturally want to make a profit. Refugees are often given substandard housing in deprived areas. People already living in those areas are angry with the government because of their own poverty. They sometimes take out their frustration on the immigrants, organising demonstrations against them or vandalising their accommodation. Any bad publicity (like the New Year's Eve attacks, allegedly by asylum

seekers from the Middle East and North Africa, on young women in Cologne) can cause people to make negative generalisations about all immigrants and asylum seekers. Olga sees them as "scapegoats" for the ineffective government.

Mikyeong and her family have always lived in South Korea which has had few immigrants. But since the 1990s increasing numbers of young women have arrived from Vietnam and other South Asian countries to marry South Korean men, who are often farmers in their forties and fifties seeking an attractive and hard working wife. These "mail order wives" as they are known, can feel very isolated in the Korean countryside, unable to communicate with their husband or his family. It is not the life they hoped for or expected when the marriage was arranged. Sadly too, some people describe the children of these marriages to be of "poor blood" and they, like their mothers, can face discrimination as they grow up.

We ended with a more positive story told by Tamiris from Brazil. First she described her own family history. Her great, great, great(?) grandfather on her mother's side came from Russia to Brazil and fell in love with a Brazilian woman. Her father's side are descended from the Indians who inhabited Brazil before the Portuguese arrived in the 16th century. Brazil had a large population of African slaves and Tami thinks she may have some African blood too! Brazil has always attracted immigrants. German, Dutch, Italian and Japanese families arrived during the 19th and 20th centuries and there are also immigrants from poorer parts of Latin America, particularly Bolivia. Recently many Syrians have arrived in São Paulo. The University is organising Portuguese lessons for them so that they can seek employment which uses their skills. Tami enjoys living in a city like São Paulo where so many cultures are represented.

For Dorothy and myself last week's discussion highlighted how much we learn from the Conversation Group whose members, so skilled at expressing themselves in English, are always ready to share their experiences and opinions.

Next week we'll be looking at proverbs and sayings, for example, "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" or "It's raining cats and dogs". Some may be puzzling, others familiar. Do bring any questions you have about the English language and its idiosyncrasies.

EDUCATION

Last week's meeting began with a discussion of elections and governments in the countries represented by our members.

China has a one party state and you don't always know where, or when to vote, even when you've reached the voting age of 18. Ecuador has a socialist but authoritarian government and the media is heavily censored. The French elect their president directly and in Japan the voting age is changing from 20 to 18. Dorothy and Theresa had differing views about the result of the recent election here, but exhibited "respect" and "tolerance" which leads us nicely into the report of our discussion of education, last week's chosen theme.

In Oxfordshire primary Schools, a different Value is highlighted every month. Respect, tolerance, cooperation and friendship are just some examples. State schools in the UK are responsible for the "moral" education of children. In France there is Civic education but "morality" is too closely associated with "religion" and all State schools and government departments are strictly secular. For example, the wearing of the Jewish kippah, Muslim hijab or Christian cross, is strictly forbidden. At the moment there is controversy about the length of skirts worn by French Muslim school girls. A girl can be sent home because her skirt is too long, not too short, as it might be in this country!

In Canada, France and the UK teaching about sex and relationships is considered very important as it helps young people make sensible choices; to say "no" to possible abuse and to avoid unwanted pregnancy, HIV and Aids. Tolerance of gay relationships is promoted in Canadian schools but many parents apparently object. In Japan sex is considered a "taboo" subject in school, sex education might be introduced when students reach 14 and then be taught to girls and boys separately.

Some members of the group, from China and Hong Kong, had been sent to a nursery as babies because their mothers had to go out to work. Most children in France, Japan and Canada spend all day in nurseries from 3 years old, although the legal age for school attendance is 6 or 7, older than here, where it is 5.

In Hong Kong the education system was very competitive and children who came low in their class ratings had been known to take their own lives rather than face disappointed parents. In France, Canada and the UK the emphasis is on encouraging children to work towards individual targets and they are praised for effort as much as for achievement. However many parents would rather know how their child's attainment compares with that of their classmates.

Corporal punishment in school is illegal in all the countries represented but still happens. In Ecuador, the President chastised a boy in the street who had made a rude gesture, not a good example to set to the country's teachers! Our new member from there did not enjoy her Convent school days because of the strict discipline and lack of freedom of expression. One Chinese member has a vivid memory of a teacher using *her* ruler to hit her best friend on the head when she made a mistake in her maths. The injustice of it still troubles her.

The biggest difference was in attitudes to homework. In Spain, the school day is often from 8.30am to 2.30pm. In all the other countries represented homework is compulsory. In South Korea the school day can last from 7.40am to 5.0pm, with extra classes running up till 11pm! School uniform varies from country to country; in Japan "uniform" can also apply to hairstyles as well as a strict dress code.

GUY FAWKES NIGHT AND FESTIVAL OF REMEMBRANCE

China, Denmark, France, Germany, Israel, Japan, Korea, Russia, Spain and Switzerland were represented by our members on Thursday. People took turns to read the attached sheet which is an attempt to explain why we light bonfires and fireworks on November 5th a specific date in our history, unlike Hallowe'en which has its roots in pre-Christian history and merged with Roman, and later Christian, festivals over the centuries.

Dorothy and I remember that when we were young children would make a "Guy" out of old clothes stuffed with newspaper, put him in a younger sibling's push chair and wheel him round the streets calling "Penny for the Guy!" The money collected would be used to buy fireworks which lit up the sky as the effigy of Guy Fawkes burned on the bonfire lit in the garden or back yard. We also remember stories of terrible accidents caused by the mishandling or malicious use of fireworks. Now their sale is restricted and it is illegal to let them off in a public place without a licence. Many local organisations put on displays which are safer for families to attend.

Are fireworks an important part of tradition in other countries?

In all the countries represented by our participants, fireworks feature in New Year celebrations. (In China this is usually in February, of course.) In Switzerland they are set off high in the Alps, to be seen in France! The Swiss can see French fireworks on the eve of Bastille Day, July 13th, across Lake Geneva. In some countries, as in Britain, the sale and use of fireworks is restricted by law. You need a licence in Denmark to buy fireworks, or light bonfires at any time other than New Year. In Israel setting off firecrackers in the street, part of the celebration of Purim, is discouraged as it can trigger post-traumatic stress in serving, or veteran, soldiers. But in China fireworks can be bought by anyone, throughout the year, as they can in Russia, where "some people are stupid with them", letting them off in the street. However, they are used to mark special family events. Maria's brother gave his wife a lovely surprise, a firework display she could see from the window, just after she'd given birth to their first child.

Are bonfires an important part of your country's culture?

In Denmark bonfires are lit on midsummer's day, and in Spain they are lit to mark the festival of St Juan, particularly in coastal towns; a beach is a safe place for a bonfire. In South Korea that bonfires used to be lit to celebrate young people going to University, but now this is illegal! And in Israel it is now forbidden to light bonfires on the 44th day after Passover (Shavuot?) because of pollution. In Russia and Poland a "picnic" was incomplete without sausages and other food cooked over an open fire. In Poland now portable barbecues mean you don't have to start gathering firewood before you can eat, still more exciting than a packet of cheese sandwiches.

Why are people wearing poppies at this time?

Dorothy described the Festival of Remembrance held annually on November 11th to mark the end of the First World War, exactly 100 years ago. On May 4th Danish people put candles in their windows to mark the end of the Second World War. The day before Independence Day in Israel a siren sounds and everyone stops what they're doing to remember fallen soldiers and victims of terrorism. It is a solemn day in contrast to the celebration of Independence. The date of the Warsaw Uprising is also commemorated each year. The end of the war between Korea and China is celebrated on August 15th but two days, in March or April, are designated as "tomb sweeping days" in China, when families visit the graves of their ancestors. In August there is a similar festival in Japan, when the souls of the ancestors are honoured, their graves visited and bonfires and fireworks light up the night sky.

EDUCATION AND RELIGION IN SCHOOLS

Last Thursday our theme was education; a vast subject to cover in just over an hour, with members from Germany, Japan, Korea, Nepal, Peru, Poland and the UK, of course! What did our education systems have in common, and what differences were highlighted in our discussion?

The most surprising difference for those present was that in the UK parents still send their children to be educated in a boarding school. Nowadays they can be weekly boarders, but in former years they would only come home for school holidays. The oldest of such schools are known as “Public Schools” because when they were established several hundred years ago, they were open to all children (whose parents could afford the fees!) regardless of their religion or where they lived. Boarding schools do not exist in any of the countries represented by our members, apart from in Nepal, where the few which exist are highly competitive.

In all the countries represented, education is compulsory from the age of 5 or 6 and is paid for by the government. What varied was the confidence which people have in their government (or state) schools.

In Korea and Nepal parents feel they must pay for their children’s education if they are to go on to university and have the chance to choose a prestigious career. In Japanese private schools children are taught to speak English from a young age whereas in Japanese state schools you learn to read and write English correctly but lack the confidence to speak it. (Utako’s husband had the advantage of going to school in England for two years, but sadly, on his return to Japan his friends teased him so much about his “posh” English accent that he simply forgot how to use it.)

State schools in Poland and Peru generally provide a sound education but some parents prefer to pay private school fees as they feel it gives their family social status. Germany has fewer private schools than any of the countries represented as parents trust the local state school to educate their children.

Our other theme was that of religion in school. In Poland, the Catholic Church has an enormous influence in state schools, from the early years to the top of Secondary level. Kasia feels this influences the curriculum; for example, pupils are not taught about evolution, and also the discipline in school. If her daughter goes through the State system, Kasia is concerned that she’ll be a rebel as Kasia herself was, constantly in trouble for questioning authority! However, paying for a private education would be contrary to their family’s values and Antonina would mix only with children from a privileged background. In Peru, another Catholic country, the Church also has a strong influence and Laura feels that students are not encouraged to think for themselves and become independent learners.

In Germany you must study Christianity from a Catholic or Protestant perspective, or else study Ethics. However in state schools in Nepal, Japan or Korea, religion is not taught in school and has no influence on education. Newcomers were interested that in UK primary Schools, Christianity and two other religions (usually Judaism or Islam) are taught to all children and Religious Studies is a popular exam subject in Secondary School.

Next Thursday we’ll be talking about food! Which is the most important meal of the day in your country? Do you have a national dish? Which are your favourite food shops and restaurants in Oxford?

ENGLISH WORDS

Although I'd decided only to write a short piece about last Thursday's meeting topics ranged from Shakespeare to common swear words so it's as long as ever.

Shakespeare was not popular with Topaz who had had to read the plays at school but never seen them performed. Others had been confused by performances (in Oxford) where the small cast meant one actor took several roles, and many had enjoyed the film of Romeo and Juliet. Although most were aware that in Shakespeare's time women's roles would have been played by boys, all were surprised that this still happens. Yes, Benedict Cumberbatch really did play the Fairy Queen Titania in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" when he was a boarder at Harrow Public School.

Of course, it is confusing for anyone from outside the UK that our Public Schools are the most expensive fee paying schools whereas one might assume that "public" meant for everyone. Perhaps we need a separate meeting on the theme of education.

Other words or expressions which Newcomers find interesting or puzzling are the different meanings of trousers, pants and underwear. What we call The Underground or Tube would be called a Subway or Metro in most cities, and a subway in this country is a passage to take you safely under a main road. But what is the difference between a Dual Carriageway, a Highway and a Motorway?

Members from China, Japan and South Korea find it difficult to know whether to answer "yes" or "no" to a negative question. "Quite" is a perplexing word isn't it? In "It's quite interesting" it has a different meaning from in the phrase "it's quite right".

No one knew of the existence of Cockney Rhyming Slang and were surprised that it is still used. "To take a butchers" means "to take a look" in rhyming slang, "look" rhymes with "butcher's hook" you see. A man might refer to his wife as "trouble", "wife" rhymes with "trouble and strife". Eyes are "mincers" in rhyming slang, because they rhyme with "mince pies".

We had a lively discussion about swear words, the conclusion of which was only use them in the privacy of your home when you are really angry, having cut your thumb when opening a can, or spilt red wine on a white carpet.

CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR

Our themes became Christmas (in Britain) and New Year (in Japan). Our members were all from Japan and were interested to learn about what happens at Christmas in the UK.

Do British people go to a church service at Christmas?

Many British people who do not attend church regularly during the year do so at Christmas. As Christmas Day approaches there will be special services in many churches and colleges and everyone, regardless of their beliefs is welcome to attend. Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve is always popular. Dorothy says that if any Newcomers intend to come to Christchurch Cathedral at 11.00 am on Christmas Day do let her know, arrive early and she'll find you a good place to sit.

Do people still send Christmas cards?

Christmas cards are still a good way to keep up with friends and family we don't often see. Dorothy is organised and writes one sentence in each card she sends, relevant to the recipient. I get carried away and write on every square inch of space, and end up having to send them first class on December 22nd. Concern for the environment and the cost of postage have resulted in many people sending "e cards", less personal perhaps but they arrive on time and are more eco-friendly. However many local and international charities raise money and awareness by producing and selling Christmas cards and we wouldn't want them to lose out to digital Christmas cards.

What food is associated with Christmas?

The collect, or special prayer, for the last Sunday before Advent (the four week preparation for Christmas in the Christian calendar) starts with the command "Stir up O Lord the wills of thy people." "Stir Up Sunday" has for years now been the day on which the family takes turns to stir the Christmas pudding mixture, (which includes dried fruit, sugar, flour, suet and a generous amount of alcohol to help preserve it). The puddings are steamed for hours, then on Christmas Day need thorough reheating before brandy is poured over and set alight with a match. Traditionally the Christmas cake is also made weeks ahead, dried fruit, sugar, butter, eggs, flour, spices and possibly sherry are the main ingredients but is cooked in the oven, not steamed. Marzipan is spread over the top of the cake, then royal icing, made with egg white and icing sugar. On Christmas Day itself turkey, capon or goose are served with sausages, stuffing, cranberry sauce, bread sauce and Brussels sprouts, roast parsnips and potatoes with Christmas pudding, brandy sauce, sometimes jelly or trifle, to follow.

How do families spend Christmas day?

On Christmas Eve thoughtful families feel Santa Claus deserves some sustenance and during the evening leave him a mince pie, glass of whiskey, (if he's very lucky) and chopped carrots for his reindeer. The children then hang up their stockings for him to fill with small gifts, starting with a tangerine in the toe, nuts, and a sugar mouse, small books and toys. This sounds straightforward, but not everyone has socks or stockings large enough to contain the small gifts. Some optimistic children hang up a pillow case. And what constitutes a child? Many teenagers, students and young adults still expect a stocking even if they are up far later than exhausted Santa. That's just the start of the variations in family traditions. Others might be: Which church service do you go to, if any? Who is invited for Christmas? Should it just be for the family or should

even unpopular relatives be asked? Do you go for a walk on Christmas morning? When do you cook, and eat the turkey? And when do you open the presents? Do you watch TV, talk, or play games in the evening? We take our family's way of "doing" Christmas for granted and it can be a test of a couple's negotiating and decision making skills when planning their first Christmas together!

Is Christmas recognised in Japan?

Christmas in Japan is totally secular, often considered a romantic time for couples, and Christmas trees are everywhere. Chicken is the most popular Christmas meal. It is New Year that families celebrate together; our Newcomers said it was more usual to stay with the parents of the husband than the wife's family. The food eaten is called "Osechi" and it is served in a segmented box, beautifully arranged with special attention to colour. Rice cakes are made with salt, sugar and soy sauce and shrimps are marinated, to preserve them. Every dish has its meaning, lotus roots for longevity, rice cakes for happiness. (Please send in a correction, and more examples, if I haven't remembered accurately!)

I must tell you about the youngest members of Thursday's group. Mari, nearly one, who likes exploring, and Kazuki, 3 years old. He opened all the doors on Dorothy's advent calendar in order and closed them so he could start again on December 1st, at home. He sang "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" so tunefully we thought he should audition for one of the college choir schools.

CHRISTMAS VACATION

It was natural that we would talk about how we had spent the Christmas Vacation. Travel, food and tradition became the major themes and there were many new experiences to share.

Sally Jin from China, having taken her twins to Birmingham to visit the Chocolate Factory and the Science Museum, returned just in time to prepare Christmas dinner for her own, and Diana's family. It was the first time she'd ever cooked a turkey or "pigs in blankets". Utako, her husband and their small daughter spent their first English Christmas in Wilmslow, near Manchester, at the home of her husband's Primary School teacher. (He must have been a memorable pupil!) She was impressed with the number of vegetables accompanying the turkey and found Christmas pudding delicious. Fang had wanted to cook a special Christmas dinner for a young Chinese visitor, but her 10 month old son's illness made this impossible. To her surprise every hotel and restaurant was fully booked (as so many people now avoid cooking Christmas lunch!). But they did enjoy a rather expensive coffee and dessert at the Old Parsonage. Diana Yang went to her husband's work celebrations. It was the first time she'd come across Secret Santa, which is a popular way to give Christmas presents to friends anonymously in the UK.

Hannukah and Christmas were unusually close this year. Shaked and her husband from Israel, enjoyed both, with their new baby, Adam. Christmas festivities with neighbours and friends included "Yanky Swap", a more sophisticated version of "Secret Santa" where presents can be exchanged (or grabbed?) by another player. But everyone ends up with something; Shaked now has a game of "Twister". (We once played it at Conversation Group, a year ago and will do so again; we can have two games going on simultaneously.) At the Hannukah gatherings traditional food, "latkes" (crisp potato cakes) were served with sour cream, and special doughnuts, unlike any you can buy here, were served with strawberry jam.

Some Newcomers found Oxford a bit quiet at Christmas. Sandy, Mei and Sally, all from China, travelled to Edinburgh with their families in time for Hogmanay. They loved the fireworks and torchlight procession on December 31st but didn't try Haggis on this occasion. Mayuko and her husband did eat Haggis, accompanied by a glass of whiskey. They also took a ferry from Edinburgh to visit an offshore whiskey distillery. Others travelled even further afield. Shoko and her family return to Japan in March. They have spent several Christmases in the UK so went to Spain, where they had tapas and paella for their Christmas lunch, in beautiful sunshine. Maarit returned home to Finland but sadly had flu for a week so could not enjoy smoked fish, carrot casserole and other traditional Christmas food. Perhaps the most exciting journey was made by Yukari. She and her husband travelled to Turkey where she met his parents for the first time. They do not speak English (or Japanese) but her husband acted as interpreter and they really made Yukari feel part of the family. A memorable Christmas indeed!

Next week we'd like you to tell us what issues are in the news in your country. What is the reaction to Donald Trump? Do you have an election coming up soon? Who are the most talked about personalities in the media in 2017?

GREEN SPACES AND FREE PLACES

We then shared information about "Green spaces and Free Places" around Oxford.

There are the University Parks, Christchurch Meadows, Port Meadow, walks beside the Thames and the Oxford Canal, besides parks and playgrounds in all Oxford's suburbs.

www.oxfordwalks.org.uk lists many self guided walks, between one and 9 miles, withing reach of the City Centre, under various categories, according to your interests.

www.officialscholarswalk-tours.com offer 2 hour free guided walking tours on different themes.

Bury Knowle Park has tennis courts which are free in the mornings because no one is there to take your money. They are well kept up. You can also join "Silver Joggers" there, from 10.30am to 11.30am every Thursday morning if you've never run before or want to go back to running after a break.

www.pingoxford.co.uk lists places where you can play Table Tennis outdoors, free!

Then, of course, there are the museums. The Ashmolean, the University Museum, the Pitt Rivers, the History of Science and the Modern Art Museums are all free, have interesting talks and also worksheets and activities for children.

For music lovers there is choral evensong at Christchurch and New College and other colleges too, see their websites. And there is a free concert, with Fairtrade coffee and tea at the City Church, St Michael in the Northgate. To find details of their weekly programme go to www.smng.org.co.uk

www.dailyinfo.co.uk is a mine of useful information too.

FAMILIES PART 1

Our theme last week was families. How much has family life changed in the countries represented by our members Germany, Japan, Russia and Switzerland in the last few decades?

Today it is usual for both partners to work. This is partly because many women want to pursue the careers for which they have trained, but it is also an economic necessity as housing and childcare are so expensive. The mother of our Russian representative had made sure he understood about equality from childhood; she taught him to cook as well as do his share of housework. Now in Oxford he is caring for his 2 year old son (her grandson) while his wife studies.

But it was generally agreed that even if women earn the same or more than men, the role of managing the home and bringing up the children still falls on the wife, and it is harder for them to get to the top in their careers. Part time work is difficult to find for either parent in Japan and although school hours are longer than in Europe, it is often impossible to find a job that is compatible with the school day or school holidays. All agreed too, it is much harder for men, than for women, to find part time work, even if they want to share the childcare.

Does the Government help with the costs of childcare? In Germany parents receive the equivalent of £200 a month for each child, but places in state run nurseries are very limited. The Russian government seemed to be the most generous, giving food and milk allowances for each child as well as money, perhaps to encourage larger families!

What are the traditions surrounding new babies? In Russia, Switzerland and Germany it seems that fewer babies are baptised. However Carla's baby Nicholas is to be christened on their return to Germany, whether or not he fits into the family Christening gown. Children are named after a saint, a well-known person, a relative or because parents like the sound of the name. However, in Japan, children's names are written in Chinese characters and have a meaning. It is also important to be aware of the number of strokes in each character of the first name, because these must be added to the strokes in the family name. Megumi was almost called Keiko but that would have brought the total number of strokes to 29, an unlucky number which foretells ill health for the child. I have her Japanese name in my notebook but couldn't transcribe the characters into "Word" for this summary.

Next week our topic will be housing and homes. As well as hearing about your home in your own country it would be interesting to hear your views on housing in Oxford and in Britain.

BAPTISM AND CELEBRATIONS

Five very different countries: Japan, Mexico, China, Israel and Nepal, but we found some surprising similarities in how they celebrate important events, particularly those involving children.

In Mexico, the first big event is baptism, followed by the child being presented to the Lord God in church at the age of three. Girls have a special party when they reach the age of 15, but there is nothing similar for the boys. On 16th September, the whole country celebrates Independence Day.

In China 100 guests are invited when the baby is one month old, and surround the infant with various objects, such as a pen, a book or a comb. Whichever the baby touches is regarded as an indication of his or her future career.

Israel celebrates all the very special events in Jewish history and religion, particularly independence day. At this point, we had a very interesting digression into the origins of the Druze religion, which is very secret and absolutely unique, and yet its members are important participants in Israeli academic and military life.

Japan has a big celebration when a child is three months old, and two more for girls at 3 and 7, and one for boys at 5. At these times the family go to pray at the shrines that the child will be healthy. Twenty is the age when adulthood is reached and time for another party. At sixty, they celebrate their survival thus far!

Perhaps the most colourful celebrations take place in Nepal. To start with, each baby's birth is celebrated after 12 days. At six months for boys and five months for girls, there is a rice eating ceremony for the babies. At these times, as in China, the baby is surrounded with objects of all kinds. The little girls are dressed in red, and the little boys have their faces painted blue.

We all decided that the place to have a baby is Mexico, where the mother is not allowed to lift anything heavy for forty days, and during that time is surrounded with tender loving care, so she can fully recover from the birth.

This has been a wonderful year for Theresa and for me. We would like to thank all the members of the Conversation Group for all they have taught us about their own countries and for all their kindness and generosity to us and to each other during the past year.

FAMILIES PART 2

Last Thursday our theme was families. We looked at how the different generations care for each other and the group shared their personal experiences.

Dorothy's father lived with them and she credits the successful careers of her son and daughter partly to his help with homework! Sergio from Spain remembers being met from school daily, by his grandfather, enabling his parents to work. Now the care of his widowed grandmother is shared by his uncles so no one has her living with them all the time. In parts of China, it is still considered the duty of children to look after their parents and grandparents, apparently.

Livia said that she would expect to return to Brazil to live near her parents, which might be difficult if her husband wants a career in Europe. Anne said that her parents chose to live in a residential home in Brittany, where they have always lived rather than move to be near her family in Tours. In Austria the elderly prefer to stay in their own homes, sometimes with a carer (nowadays often from Romania) than to impose on the younger generation.

The subject of mothers-in-law provoked a lively discussion. In Japan the husband's mother traditionally "gives the instructions" which a young wife is supposed to follow. However nowadays Japanese couples often move to another town to live and work. Husbands no longer have to act as the go between when their wives don't want to obey their mother-in-law's rules. There is a saying that no mother thinks any girl is good enough for her son but those members of the group who are mothers-in-law are thankful that they have a good relationship with their sons-in-law and daughters-in-law and never want to interfere with how they run their lives. And in many countries young parents rely on both sets of grandparents to mind the children so that they can go out to work, as child care can be very expensive.

We talked about changes that have taken place over the years. The Newcomers present came from smaller families than their parents; Fengjiao from China is of course an only child. If you come from a smaller family there is more chance that you can go to University and become independent from your parents. However Sergio said that since the economic crisis, 52 per cent of young Spanish people, many of them graduates, have no work and have to live with their parents again. (He did say that some men in their late thirties still live at home and rely on their mothers to look after them, even if they go out to work.)

It was generally agreed that however much you like living in Oxford, there are times when you do miss your family, worry about them, and they must feel the same way. I cannot send this without acknowledging the impact of Friday's tragic events in Paris must have had, particularly on the French Newcomers but surely on us all.

Next week we would like you to tell us about the Health Service in your country, how is it organised and how is it paid for? We will try to answer any questions you have about our NHS.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

We had an interesting discussion about marriage (or not) and family life in the countries represented by those attending yesterday's group.

In each country represented there have been big changes. For example, the grandparents of members from Taiwan and Japan had had marriages arranged by their parents. Now in Taiwan, living with the partner of your choice, or even having a baby, before you're married, is acceptable. The birth rate here is falling because life is so expensive and both partners have to work, especially in Taipei. Children are sometimes sent to the country to be brought up by grandparents and only see their parents at weekends.

In Japan couples live together but "if you are pregnant before marriage it is not really a happy thing to say". Many women cannot continue to work after having children because life and childcare in large cities is so expensive so families tend to live in the suburbs and husbands work long hours, have long commutes and see little of their children.

Life is expensive in Holland, too. "We liked our parents being at home but this is not an option for us." There is only two months maternity and two months paternity leave so both parents go out to work and rely on grandparents or nurseries for childcare. Gay marriage is allowed but if one partner parents a child there is a lengthy and expensive process for the other partner to be considered a legal parent.

Canada and Germany seemed to be the best countries in which to start a family among those represented by our group. In Canada fathers have six months paternity leave and mothers can claim for a year. There are many free children's facilities and single mothers "do really well" as do "stay at home Dads". In Germany child benefit is 180 Euros a month which, in certain circumstances, is paid until the "child" has graduated from university!

Dorothy will let you know about next week's theme but on March 6th please bring an article from a newspaper or magazine which "caught your eye" (an interesting English expression!). And on March 13th we'll be meeting at Theresa's house to say goodbye to Ritzuko who has been a member of Newcomers and attended conversation group for many years and is returning to Japan on March 26th.

FOOD

Our topic was food and to start us off Junko had brought in some homemade macaroons! She is a professional pastry cook at home in Japan. You might have been lucky enough to sample more of her baking at yesterday's Christmas Fair.

What is a typical meal in Germany, Japan or Switzerland?

Megumi showed us pictures of the traditional meal she prepared for guests the previous day. First she went to the fish market off Botley Road to buy for sushi grade tuna and salmon. Although the fishmonger washed the knife when she asked him, she did not trust his gloves. So she cooked the salmon instead of putting it raw into the sushi roll. She also served *natto* made from fermented soya beans, not greatly appreciated outside Japan. Most ingredients can be bought at the Chinese supermarket in Park End Street, but Megumi's mother sends dried shitake mushrooms and other delicacies through the post. In Japan there is a greater variety of fish to choose from than here, and people prepare it in many different ways. Carla was surprised to learn that Japanese women continue to eat fish raw during pregnancy because German women are told to avoid any raw eggs, fish or meat when expecting a baby.

Traditionally in Germany the main meal is meat, with sauce or gravy and always potatoes in some form or other. Tra German sausages are typically served grilled, with mashed potatoes and sauerkraut. The younger generation cook and eat "internationally"; Japanese restaurants are becoming increasingly popular there. However Germans of all ages eat a hot meal, their main meal at lunch time. For students there is always a cafeteria on the campus offering a wide variety of dishes and in the business area of any large city the restaurants offer discounts at lunchtime to attract office workers. The family eats bread with ham or cheese at home in the evening. Animal welfare is of great concern in Germany. People want to know where their food comes from and would choose "free range" eggs over those produced by caged hens. Organic food is also very popular and many Germans are vegetarians or vegans.

Fondue is the food most associated with Switzerland. It essentially consists of a metal pot of cheese (and wine?) heated over a single flame into which one puts chunks of bread on skewers, so it was a simple, cheap and nutritious meal for Swiss shepherds and cowherds who live out in the mountain pastures during the summer months. But now there are many versions and it is often eaten on special occasions. On New Year's Eve Jeremias' family prepares a vegetable soup in their fondue set into which they dunk chunks of raw meat on skewers. They then dip the cooked meat in various chutneys or sauces. Swiss herdsmen also ate *raclette*, a type of hard cheese that is melted and eaten with bread. It is now popular throughout Europe; you can even eat it in a café on the roof of the Westgate Centre! Another popular dish originating in Switzerland is *rosti* potatoes, grated potatoes heated in a very hot frying pan. In Switzerland, as in Germany, the main meal is eaten at midday, the family eat bread, cheese and ham together in the evening. The Japanese Newcomers present felt they knew a lot about Swiss meals because the story of Heidi is so popular in Japan.

What about breakfast, and children's snacks?

A traditional Japanese breakfast of rice, miso soup, possibly *natto*, raw egg and a bowl of pickled vegetables is, apart from the salty vegetables, a healthy way to start the day. Morning school is from 8.10 am to 12.30 pm and the children eat no snacks. If the school provides no lunch, and some have a very varied menu, the children's mother prepares a

colourful and healthy packed lunch; often the food is arranged to resemble cartoon characters. Megumi's daughter was thrilled that her teacher at St Ebbes shared bars of chocolate with the students to help them understand fractions!

German families start the day with muesli, bread or toast spread with real butter, marmalade, honey or nutella. Adults have coffee, children hot chocolate. Morning school starts at 7.50 am and finishes at 1.0 pm (or used to) when the children went home for a cooked lunch. In spite of this carbohydrate breakfast, German children take a sandwich and fruit to eat at 10.00 am.

Like many Swiss workers Jeremias leaves for work very early, without breakfast. However, at 9.00am in any office or building site no one is working. They are eating, croissants or filled rolls, to keep them going till lunch time. Traditionally Swiss families start the day with muesli, bread and honey. On Saturday nights Jeremias' mother prepares a special plaited loaf that is left to rise before it's cooked and eaten with butter and honey for Sunday breakfast.

Last Thursday our topic was food and there was a certain competitive element in the group! Peru has won the World Travel Awards for being South America's Leading Culinary Destination for the last 5 years, whereas "Washoku", traditional Japanese cooking has been added to Unesco's "intangible heritage" list. The Chinese claim to love food more than any other people in the world and after the feasting at Chinese New Year most people have put on a few kilos.

A filling and nutritious breakfast seems essential in all the countries represented: meat or cheese sandwiches in Poland and Hungary, miso soup, rice and fish stew in Japan, dumplings and noodle soup in China, muesli, bread and cheese in Germany, "pan con tamal" in Peru, for which I can pass on a recipe (it includes polenta, corn meal, pork) are just a few examples. How do people have time to eat, let alone prepare, such breakfasts and still get to work on time? How do our group members stay so slim?

Traditionally lunch in Peru is often prepared by the grandmother in time for children coming home from school and other family members spending 2 hours of the working day sharing lunch. If your work is far from home you take your cooked lunch (not a sandwich!) in a picnic box. In China, everyone shares a minimum of 5 dishes; soup is eaten as part of the main meal and desserts or sweets are rare. In Germany now the trend is to eat a small lunch with the main meal in the evening, often three or four separate courses.

What about children's diet? British children are notoriously fussy eaters and childhood obesity is a national problem. School dinners are free to children up to the age of 7 and they also receive a daily portion of fruit. In Japan school children have a choice of a traditional Japanese lunch, or pasta and salad for example, but no sweets or dessert. Okuizome is a ceremony in which a Japanese baby, 100 days old, is given food for the first time. Rice with adzuki beans and fried sea bream are always included in this first menu and traditionally it is the father and grandfather who pretend to feed the baby. The ceremony is to ensure the baby never goes hungry throughout his or her life.

Once again Dorothy and I learned so much from all your contributions. And thank you to Zhu for Chinese rice crackers and Laura for homemade Peruvian biscuits known as Alfajores which staved off our pangs of hunger.

Our next theme will be St Valentine's Day. We'll tell you about St Valentine and the various customs and traditions as well as hearing about romance in your country!

MENUS AND NEWS ARTICLES

Dorothy had collected some exciting menus so that everyone could practise choosing their favourite dishes as well as being mindful of the final bill at this week's meeting. But, alas, she couldn't be with us, so we had a change of plan.

This last Thursday, we had a lot of fun, pouring over menus from the Cherwell Boathouse, The Quod and The Vaults restaurants, including their breakfast menu, decoding GF and DF (gluten free and dairy free), discovering that The Quod gives 10% discount to alumni and that the Cherwell Boathouse has vegan dishes. Most restaurants have a children's menu. The Newcomers were able to give us useful advice, this time on the Japanese restaurant in Holywell and the best Indian restaurant in Jericho.

Members looked through a selection of recent newspapers to see what interested, baffled or amused them which led to some interesting discussions. Shoko and Michyo chose an article which read "GM food safe to eat say world's leading scientists". They are sceptical and thankful that GM food is banned in Japan, as it is in the parts of Europe. Natali said that GM corn has been grown in Mexico for 30 years but many people are uneasy about it and the Monsanto company is very unpopular. There was general concern that no one knows the long term effects on the environment, Feng Jiao however, says her friends working in that area of science feel GM food is safe. Even more extreme than GM crops was a TED talk Renate had heard about the possibility of creating animal products in a laboratory. (The talk can be heard by logging on to www.ted.com/talks/ and searching for Andras Forgacs leather and meat without killing animals, recorded in June 2013. There is an English version!)

Feng Jiao and Elisa were interested by the headline "One in three has fallen into poverty", in Britain. We discussed how definitions of poverty can vary from country to country. High rents in an area like Oxford mean that families can slide into poverty even if their income seems reasonable. Elisa says that in Spain unemployment is a huge problem and even qualified doctors can be offered a contract for just one day in some hospitals as there isn't the money to pay them. Ironically in the UK it's been suggested that nurses could take over some of the responsibilities of doctors because we do not have enough of them.

Shobha was delighted to find a picture of the Bollywood film actress, and former Miss World, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, at the Cannes film festival. Elisa remembered how, as a teenage back backer, she had gone to a Bollywood film in an Indian town (whose name now escapes her as does the name of the film) and how the audience cheered, joined in the songs, and danced in the aisles, behaviour that would not be acceptable in the Odeon or the Phoenix, I guess.

Natali and Renate chose a photo with the caption, "The Queen on her way to the state opening of parliament. She took the lift in the Palace of Westminster for the first time before delivering her speech." They were amazed she hadn't used the lift before. Renate imagined her, all the way through her eighties, insisting "I want to walk up the stairs, please" but being persuaded to use the lift now she's 90. Neither Mexico nor Brazil have a monarchy so they are particularly intrigued by the detailed coverage of our royal family.

Next week we hope Dorothy will be here and we really will have fun with menus. If you have a meal out before then do bring the menu, and your opinions.

FOOD AND SHOPS

Last Thursday the topic was food and it was amazing what we learnt!

Meat and fish, should they be bought dead or alive? Topaz told us that when she was growing up in Hong Kong, her grandmother preferred to buy chicken and fish alive and was suspicious of any meat that might have been dead more than a few hours. Ding Chen from mainland China agreed; Chinese markets sell live chickens, ducks and fish even today. Manon, from Canada, said she would always buy fish, lobsters and shellfish while still alive to cook at home. (She is an expert on how to select and cook mussels, if you need advice.) Japanese Newcomers find it hard to buy the right fish for making sushi. Shoku brought in pictures of sushi as it was made, of fermented fish, hundreds of years ago.

While still on the subject of meat and fish, there were complaints from our European members that the meat here is good quality but the cuts are limited. And Akpene, brought up in Togo, wonders why goat meat isn't available in Oxford. (Have you tried the Afro Caribbean shops on Cowley Road?) Tamiris from Brazil, was not part of this discussion. She is vegetarian, and fortunately finds a good choice of inexpensive food and soya milk in local shops and might even become vegan while here!

Breakfast was another theme for discussion. For most of those present it is the most important meal of the day, in southern Germany cooked breakfast is still popular, washed down by beer, at the weekend. Our members from France and Spain just eat bread and jam for breakfast. (There was some criticism of the bread available in Oxford supermarkets!)

In China rice is the staple starch food and rice porridge, congee, is eaten at breakfast as well as noodles and buns made with rice flour. In Mexico tortillas, eggs and beans are popular breakfast food, but so far Natalie has been unable to buy authentic Mexican tortillas here. In Canada the milk you pour on your cereals would have been bought in plastic bags, 4 pints at a time! This has been the tradition for decades, so much more environmentally friendly than the plastic containers which have replaced the glass bottles once delivered to our doors.

Most people are able to buy what they need in Oxford supermarkets but wanted to know about local Farmers' Markets. These happen in North Parade, Summertown, Wolvercote, Headington, East Oxford and Gloucester Green. Their websites will tell you on which days they are held; there will always be a bakery stall and fresh fruit and vegetables. And I have found out about the Fish Market in Osney Mead which apparently sells a huge variety of inexpensive fish daily and where you can buy wonderful fish and chips on Fridays. Some people like the idea of having organic vegetables delivered each week and I find that besides Abel and Cole and Riverford there are some local firms who do this, a site called Ox Nosh will give details.

So thank you, everyone, on behalf of Dorothy and myself, for your contributions to our learning, and to Shoko and Topaz who brought cake, pancakes and maple syrup for us all to share.

When discussing future meetings some members, from countries nearer the equator, are worried about surviving the winter in Oxford. What clothes do we wear? Where can they buy clothes that aren't too expensive but will keep them warm? So next week our theme will be clothes, fashion and beauty. Tell us about the latest trends in your country and perhaps how styles have changed since your parents were young. And of course we want to know your experience of clothes shopping in Oxford.

GAMES PART 2

Last week we brought some traditional, and not so traditional, games to play.

Snakes and Ladders seems to be a universal game but not everyone plays by the rule that you are sent back to the beginning if another player lands on the same number as you. Landing on a snake is demoralising enough, surely! But at least it's just a game of chance so you don't have to feel a failure if you never seem to win. Ludo, another game of chance can drag on unless you are allowed to put all your counters on the board near the beginning and then decide which one you want to move with the throw of the dice.

For "Twister" you need to wear clothes in which you can move easily, a sense of humour and a lack of pride, as it involves putting hands and feet onto coloured circles according to a random "twister". The winner is the one who can keep their balance without knocking other players of theirs, so considerable skill is involved here.

Scrabble is played in France, with a different distribution of letters from the English version, and the score for each letter is different too. Our members from China and South Korea didn't think there was a version of scrabble in their countries, understandable when you think of the number of characters in their alphabets.

"Pick up Sticks" needs concentration, ingenuity and a steady hand as well as being a good game in which children can practise their addition skills as each stick has a different score according to its colour.

Next week our theme will be weather and climate. There are so many ways to describe the weather in English as it is so unpredictable and traditionally it was the one subject you could discuss without offending anyone, unlike politics and/or religion. However now that Climate Change is on the political agenda even temperature and rainfall have become controversial. So we look forward to hearing about weather, climate and seasonal changes in your countries, and your own opinions about global warming.

ALL SAINTS DAY AND HALLOWEEN

Last week members read aloud, fluently, the attached document about the history of Halloween and the traditions associated with it.

November 1st is All Saints Day and in Catholic parts of Germany and Switzerland it is an official holiday. Families gather to remember their deceased relatives. They put candles and flowers on their graves. Swiss Protestants choose the last Sunday before Advent to remember their dead.

A week in August is when Japanese people gather as families and “welcome” their ancestors, visiting their tombs with flowers and sweets. Lanterns and fires are lit at the end of the week to help the souls of the ancestors return to their mountain home. In Korea a similar festival is “very stressful for the women who have to cook special food when the rest of the family is having fun”. However now that so many women work full time the festival is smaller, but many stores take advantage of the festival by raising the prices of the special dishes.

We learned that in Peru, the period around All Saints' Day is a time when people remember their deceased relatives, sharing their memories and tending their graves. It is therefore a time of reflection rather than partying.

In Ethiopia, as in this country, it seems there is no national day on which to remember the dead. In Ethiopia each family meets up every year on the fourteenth day after the anniversary of their loved one's death. Here families choose their own way to remember those who died.

So what about Halloween? It has become increasingly commercialised in the last thirty or so years with sales of masks, vampire costumes, witches' brooms and spiders. It has become popular in many countries. Some people feel sad that it has overtaken the idea of remembering the saints, or the souls of loved ones and has become an entirely secular festival. On the other hand children do enjoy dressing up, scaring others and being scared themselves.

This was a rather sombre discussion, so rather than have a meeting about November 5th and the Gunpowder Plot (document attached in case you're interested!) our topic next week is weddings. Bring photos of your own wedding or those of family and tell us about how marriages are celebrated in your country.

HALLOWEEN

It was lovely to greet members from China, Finland, Germany, Greece, Japan and Turkey. They bravely took turns to read aloud the attached information sheet about the origins, history and traditions associated with Hallowe'en, celebrated on October 31st, which go back to Celtic and Roman times. November 1st is a religious festival commemorating the Saints of the Catholic Church, followed by All Souls' Day on November 2nd. Members had recognised the number of roads and schools as well as churches in Oxford, which are named after saints.

Saints were not mentioned again in the subsequent discussion but remembering the souls of the dead is important in many cultures.

On November 1st, in Germany and Belgium, people still preserve the tradition of putting lights on the graves of family members and holding a mass to remember them. In Greece, the Saturday before the start of Lent is when cemeteries are visited and people give money to the poor.

Spring is the time of "visiting the ancestors" in parts of China. Their tombs are swept and sometimes fake money is burnt; the ashes fly up for them to spend in heaven! Lanterns shaped like lotus flowers float down the river to show they are not forgotten.

Different parts of Japan have local traditions for honouring the dead, but mid-August is usually the time. In Kyoto you can spot five Chinese characters flaming in the "Bonfire in the Mountain" which is lit to welcome the ancestors.

Neither in the UK or in Finland is there a day set aside to remember our dead, each family has its own way of remembering.

Members were interested in the traditions of Hallowe'en in this country, particularly the idea of peeling an apple, throwing the unbroken peel over your shoulder and hoping it would fall in the shape of the initial of the man you wanted to marry. (If his name was Sam or Charles you might be lucky, but if it was Henry or Tom?) The idea of pumpkin lanterns, to ward off evil spirits also seemed attractive, although it's hard work hollowing out the pumpkin and cutting holes in the skin for the eyes and mouth. No one present had really been aware of Hallowe'en say, 20 years ago, but now it can't be avoided as companies see the opportunity for making money. In any supermarket you can buy witches' and devils' costumes, evil masks, creepy decorations. In Greece private schools promote many Hallowe'en activities "to show off how international they are." In Japan dressing for Hallowe'en parties has become really competitive for adults! All blamed its commercialisation as coming from the USA.

Trick or treating happens in the UK and most European countries. I offered the group some posters, provided by Thames Valley Police, with the words "IF you see this poster PLEASE do not Trick or Treat. Please enjoy YOUR night without disturbing ours." But no one wanted one and all are going to ensure they have plenty of small change and sweets for their scary visitors.

Next week Dorothy will be back and we are looking forward to hearing about how weddings are celebrated in your countries; perhaps you could bring pictures of your own, or those of relatives and friends. We welcome new members, former members - and children, especially if they are as quiet and creative as those who came last week, from Greece, Japan and Turkey!

HAIR AND BEAUTY

Relax! Whether you are in Japan, Israel, the UK, China, Italy, Finland, France, Germany, Nepal or Poland you will be able to have your hair done, your nails manicured, (though not always with flowers painted on them!), your eyebrows shaped in three possible (all painful) ways. The question of eyebrows was definitely the hot topic! Attitudes ranged from doing nothing to daily inspection and tweezing. Two of us (Peter and Dorothy) were initiated into the horrors of eyebrow-threading – ouch!

Changing attitudes to hair, beauty and fashion over three generations was the topic of last week's meeting. Not long ago, it was considered a mark of rebellion and disrespect to one's parents to colour one's hair in China. The clever artists in the group, with drawings, illustrated how much all had changed in their cultures over the course of their grandparents' lives.

Perms are universally popular, except in Italy, where long, straight hair is fashionable. In Israel, where much time can be spent in the sunshine, men frequently have their body hair removed. China, which until the 1980s, eschewed such frivolities, has now embraced them with much enthusiasm, including a liking for cosmetic plastic surgery. In the midst of all this sophistication, four of us admitted to washing our faces with just soap and water!

The rise of the internet has made fashion available almost everywhere. So, if you live in the far north of Finland or in a remote Chinese village, you can still wear the latest fashions.

I think I can say no subject has aroused so much laughter. However, what was interesting was that it was a useful topic, with lots of ideas on how to get hair and beauty treatments, at a reasonable price, in Oxford, by using a local college where students are supervised by their lecturers, or evening sessions at hairdressing salons, where apprentices get their training, again under supervision.

We divided into wonderfully diverse groups, (e.g. Spain, Iran, Mexico, China and Costa Rica), and found so much in common, and so much quite different, for example, sizing of clothes and shoes, or the use, or not, of sun protection.

Some of the group had already bought clothes in the UK, (Primark is loved for its amazing value), and some were looking for good, but not expensive hairdressers. The thought of young boys in Spain having their legs waxed caused great hilarity!

This coming Thursday, at 10.30am, I am looking forward to having the regular members of the Conversation Group for coffee at my house. I do hope you all can come. Theresa is very kindly organising names and will send out directions, so do get in touch with her, so that I will have some idea about numbers for coffee and cakes.

SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

Last Thursday our topic was Education. As we were a small group, instead of generalising about education in each country, each person described their own experience of school, and beyond!

Megumi started Primary School at 6 years old, having attended Kindergarten from 4. At 12 she took exams to enter the Junior High School attached to the University of Keio, the oldest in Japan, where her father was a professor. She needed to get up at 5.30 am for a train journey of an hour and a half. The school day was from 8.10 am to 2.40 pm, with optional activities till 5.0 pm; she played viola in the school orchestra. There were 48 students in her class, 32 boys and 16 girls. She was thankful that the High School, at which she continued her studies for 3 years, was just for girls. What amazed her compatriots was that she never had homework! She went on to study Politics at the prestigious Keio University, where she met her husband, and incidentally, was taught by Fusa McLynn's husband Neil. (Fusa joined Newcomers when Neil joined the academic staff at Corpus Christi College.)

Mai was brought up in Kumano, a small town in a remote part of Japan, where, she says, there was nothing to distract her from her studies! Her mother, who didn't go out to work, taught her English from a young age. She went to the local state school, which had just 600 pupils and where her father was a teacher. She was proud of her school and worked hard to show that it was as good as the larger school in the nearest big city. She got a place in the Education Department of Tokyo University. Her degree was in Social Science in Education, the focus of which was on Education in developing countries; Laos was the subject of her Masters. It was in this department that she met her future husband.

In contrast Junko said she had many distractions from studying, as she grew up in an urban environment near Tokyo. She went to state schools but in the evening attended "Cramming School" from 7.00pm to 9.00 pm, a necessity for those wanting to pass exams to enter High School and University. This, and homework, did not allow much time for clubbing. She met her future husband at Junior High School but their paths diverged when they went to different universities. Her degree was in Management. She worked in a trading company, but after eight years decided she'd like to train as a pastry cook. She took herself off to the Escoffier School in the Ritz Hotel in Paris to learn the art of French Patisserie. She completed a French course first, but still the most challenging aspect of learning to cook was to understand the instructions shouted out by the irascible French chefs. After three months she was able to find work in three Parisian Patisseries before returning to Japan.

Shimul started Primary School at 6 years old, in Bangladesh. At every stage you had to learn things by heart, and there was a lot of homework, too. At Secondary School it was the Biology teacher who made his lessons interesting and enjoyable, encouraging his students to ask questions. Biology became Shimul's favourite subject. Although he studied Geology at the North South University in Dacca, he later took a Masters in Biotechnology and this is the area he wants to pursue. He feels that on the whole education in Bangladesh tends to be narrow and uninspiring. He drew our attention to the TED talk by Satish Kumar (February 11th 2013) "Education with Hands, Heart and Head". Learning to use your hands and to appreciate the wonders of the world enables you to live a creative life and relate to others. Education should be more than just learning facts to pass exams and to work in a job you may not enjoy.

The Japanese Newcomers said how much their children enjoy their Oxford Primary schools. At St Ebbe's, where Meg's daughter goes, much of the teaching is done through cross curricular topics which increases children's motivation. Junko's daughter at New Marston Primary will never forget learning about fractions through cutting (and eating?) bars of chocolate. Mae listens to her daughter instructing her younger brother in phrases copied from her current class teacher and realises they all use different expressions! This term her teacher is a man and her words to her brother are spoken in a louder voice than usual.

Next week our theme will be pets. Did you have to leave a pet behind when you came to Oxford? Which pets are most popular? What is the attitude to animals in general? In Britain we had a Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals before we had a National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children!

HEALTH CARE PART 1

Italy, Japan, Korea, Switzerland and Turkey were represented in the group.

How is healthcare funded in each of these countries?

In Turkey and Italy health care is free, as it is in the UK, where it is funded by the National Insurance contributions of the working population. In Japan, Switzerland and South Korea everyone has to buy health insurance for themselves and their families.

In Japan you pay 30% of any treatment, the government pays the rest (unless you are very poor or over 65, in which case you pay nothing except your insurance premium).

In Korea it is wise to take out extra insurance, because not all costs are covered by the basic cover. Families can go bankrupt if a relative has expensive treatment and a long period in hospital.

Many Swiss people go abroad for medical and dental treatment, to Germany or Poland for example, because it is of a similar standard but less expensive.

How easy is it to see a doctor or specialist?

In the UK we are all registered with a Health Centre or Surgery where we need to make an appointment if we want to see a GP (General Practitioner). There is often a long wait, several days, but if the problem is urgent, you can phone 111 and after many questions by a health worker, you'll wait for a call from the emergency doctor who may want to see you that day or can arrange an earlier appointment for you to see your own GP. (In emergency phone 999 for an ambulance, or find your own way to your nearest Accident and Emergency department.)

In Italy, as in the UK, you may wait days for a GP appointment, but you'll be seen sooner if you can afford to pay. Only in Japan can you go and see a specialist doctor, possibly in a hospital, without being referred to that department by your own doctor.

In Turkey there are many doctors so you never have to wait for an appointment. European tourists don't just visit the country for its sunshine, scenery, coastline and antiquities but for various medical and dental procedures, for which they'll be met at the airport and taken to their hotel; such is the reputation of Turkish doctors and dentists!

Dr Richard Whittington told us how medical practice has changed since he was a GP. Patients came to the surgery on the day they felt ill and he did not go home till all had been seen. Then he would visit patients too ill to come to the surgery in their own homes. Another change is that there are now more young women than men choosing medicine as a career, many of whom work part-time.

GP services varied widely: from Iran where one can see one's doctor between 8am and 10pm, and in China where there are no GPs and one goes to the local community hospital. Problems in the UK included getting an appointment and the difficulty in seeing a different doctor each time and having to explain one's symptoms all over again.

Childbirth is also very different: in Mexico home births are becoming more common; In Iran, the number of Caesarean births has been very high, but is going down now; in Norway it is very expensive to have a Caesarean; in Chile, in private hospitals, the father lives in with the mother during her two day stay, and in Japan, women stay in hospital for a week after delivery, as we used to do when Theresa and I had our babies.

Next week we'll be looking at the origins and customs associated with Hallowe'en, All Saints and All Souls Day. Please tell us if these are observed in your country.

HEALTH CARE PART 2

Our theme was Health Care in the different countries represented by those present, China, Poland, Japan, Canada (Quebec) Germany and Jordan. I'll try to highlight some of their similarities and differences. In all these countries, and in the UK, Health Care is paid for by insurance contributions taken from one's salary; if you are retired or unemployed it seems that governments will make sure you have some sort of cover. But in most places the quality of care depends on where you live and how much you, or your employer, can afford to pay.

Here are some examples. In rural China every community has a Health Centre which will treat minor injuries and infections with either Western or traditional Chinese remedies. But if your illness or injury is serious the District Hospital may be a day's journey away. Queues start forming in the early morning so you would have to pay for accommodation as well as travel. For this reason many people never receive the specialist treatment they need. In Shanghai, however, it is now possible to book hospital appointments online and everyone in employment has a card entitling them to healthcare.

In Germany you can choose your Insurance company and your employer will pay your contributions. But for the self-employed insurance premiums, and doctors' fees, are very high.

In Quebec private health insurance is taken from your salary and the quality of care depends on negotiations between your employer and the insurance company. Doctors' salaries are lower in Quebec Province than in other parts of Canada so there are fewer specialists and it's hard to get a hospital appointment.

In Poland, Health Care is free but our representative feels that doctors have an authoritarian attitude and it is hard to persuade them to refer you to a specialist. Even if you are referred, bureaucracy means it could take months to get an appointment. She is glad her first child was born in the USA where she was treated with respect. "A lack of dignity" is experienced by many women delivering babies in Polish hospitals.

In Japan most people's health insurance is covered by their employer but if you are poor, unemployed or retired your treatment is free; you just pay a small amount for your doctor's appointment. You can also see a specialist without being referred by your own doctor first.

In Jordan, as in this country, there is a choice between national and private health insurance. If you choose private, you cannot change your mind. But whichever you choose you rarely have to wait more than 45 minutes to see a doctor and wait more than a day or two for a hospital appointment. For foreigners visiting Jordan as workers or tourists it costs £30 to see a doctor. Many Jordanians are aware of the health problems of the two and a half million Syrians now living in camps in their country and even poor Jordanians are very generous in helping them.

What surprised all the members of the group was how difficult it is to get antibiotics in this country, even from a doctor, when everywhere else they can be bought "over the counter" in a pharmacy. Please bring any other questions you have about our National Health Service to the meeting and we'll try to answer your queries!

But the main theme of our meeting on November 17th is houses and homes. We'd like you to describe the home you left to come to Oxford and what you've noticed about houses in this country. As usual we'll meet upstairs (in the corner with the comfortable chairs and sliding doors!) at the University Club, from 10.30am to 12pm.

HOMES

Last week Newcomers from Germany, Indonesia and Switzerland came and talked about their own homes.

Anna grew up in a 200 year old house in the countryside, near Wuppertal, in Germany. The walls were made of “clay from the river” and “woven wood”. (I wondered if this is what we would call “wattle and daub”?) Unfortunately no local builder had the skill to repair such walls. Anna’s father decided that it would be more economical to knock down the existing house and build a new one. Unfortunately the local government put a preservation order on the house; to destroy it or change its outside appearance would be illegal. So the family had to live within its bulging walls but her father was allowed to cover the stone floors with wood, install underfloor central heating and double glaze the windows, providing the frames remained intact. Anna and her husband sold the house last year and now have a flat in central Dusseldorf. Because it is in a Jewish area there has been 24 hour security protection since the 1950s; the armed guards and bright lights must seem somewhat intrusive when you’ve grown up in the heart of the countryside.

Jeremias also grew up in a big old house, surrounded by woods and farmland, near Lucerne in Switzerland. He and his siblings spent their weekends helping to renovate the house and to bring the large garden under control. Perhaps it is no coincidence that he is now a qualified builder and his brother, a garden designer! Their sister and her family live in the old house and their parents in a smaller, modernised farmhouse on the same site.

Carla was brought up in a typical 1960s townhouse between Frankfurt and Wiesbaden. It has an attic and a basement, in which there is a sauna. Saunas were very popular in Germany at that time but now they are considered too expensive to run and they are not installed in modern houses. But basements are still considered important; the washing machine and dryer are kept there and there is usually lots of storage space.

Most houses in Indonesia are built of brick and are three storeys high. Young people live with their parents until they marry. In Adiba’s family the daughters had their own bedrooms, the sons had to share, but Oka shared with her sisters and the brothers had their own rooms. There are usually two or three bathrooms. It turns out that both Newcomers live in Surabaya City, East Java. Adiba’s area was very quiet until a bridge was built linking it to the nearest island. Now it has become far busier as people from the island come into the city to work.

The one thing common to each of these countries was the way property is advertised. The floor area, measured in square metres, is as important as the number of rooms, even more important in Germany where the number of rooms is sometimes not mentioned. In the UK, however, there is always a description of the rooms, but the area of the whole property is rarely stated. Proximity to a good school, hospital, city centre and transport links is used as a selling point. In every country it seems that city centre properties may be smaller and more expensive but you don’t have the cost of travelling to work.

Food seemed the most popular choice of topic for next week’s group, November 23rd. The following week, November 30th, is our last meeting of the term and our theme will be celebrations.

HOUSES AND HOUSING

Last week our members came from Quebec Province, China, Nepal, Japan, Israel, Korea, Italy and Finland and our topic was housing. We found there was much in common, especially the problems, but there were interesting differences too.

The cost of housing has an influence on family life, especially in Korea. The best schools, colleges and jobs are in Seoul which makes it an expensive city in which to live. The cost of a flat is equivalent to 30 years of your annual salary. Therefore many young people share their parents' home until they can earn enough to rent somewhere with their future spouse, maybe when they're in their mid thirties. For this reason, and because it costs so much to educate a child, families with more than two children are rare. "If you see a family with four children you know they must be REALLY rich!" said our Korean representative.

In Katmandou, capital of Nepal, a young couple doesn't expect to set up their own home, even if they are both working. They move into the house of the husband's parents, usually built on four floors. Many poor Nepalese families move from the countryside to seek work in the city and live in crowded, unsafe buildings without running water or electricity.

Housing in any large city can be expensive. Beijing has a population of 30 million and the price of an apartment in the centre can double in just three years. In 2017 the government buildings are to move to a suburb, Tong Zhu, but instead of relieving pressure on homes in the city, people fear it will put up prices in that area too. If you are very wealthy, you can buy a house on the outskirts of Beijing, but apparently two properties is the legal limit, even for the rich.

In Tel Aviv you have to put down a third of the price of the property you wish to buy as a deposit, but if you choose to rent, it can be as much as your monthly salary.

However, there were exceptions; in Montreal, and on the outskirts of Helsinki you can live in a three bedroomed house or apartment for the same rent as a one bedroomed flat in Oxford!

Another theme was how much influence the climate and other geographical and political factors have on the way homes are designed. In Japan houses must withstand earthquakes. One Newcomer's grandmother still lives in a house made from paper and wood. No Japanese homes are made from bricks. High rise flats are made of concrete, wood and steel. The government doesn't encourage the restoration of old houses, preferring the construction of new homes using the latest materials. Japan must be one of the few places in the world where houses decrease in value as they get older.

In Israel every house has to have a concrete, windowless room in which you can take shelter. This can double as a larder or wash room. The windows in the rest of the house are always open except in the very short winters. A "back yard" where you can eat and socialise is part of every Israeli home.

In Finland, by contrast, houses are designed to preserve heat, with triple glazed windows and thick wood walls.

In Montreal there are actually double windows so you have a choice of how much fresh air to allow in, even in sub zero temperatures. Houses are built on three levels with a basement, and steps up to the front door so that you can open it, however deep the snow. And the porch inside, where you take off your coats and boots, helps to stop the cold air entering with you.

What were their thoughts on British homes? Our Italian representative was surprised not to find a single British bathroom containing a bidet. In Canada there is not

often a bidet, not always a shower, but always a large bath in every home. It seems, however, that the biggest difference between British homes, and those of the group, is our love of carpets. They all described wooden or ceramic floors, whatever climate they lived in, surely so much easier to keep clean!

COST OF HOUSING

It was interesting to hear about homes in the countries represented by our members as well as their impressions of houses here. In cities in Mexico, Brazil, China, Japan and Spain the majority of people live in high rise flats. Outside the city centres, houses are more individual and spacious; streets of "between the wars semis" are a particularly British phenomenon it seems!

Everywhere it is expensive for young people to rent or buy their first home. São Paulo is becoming as expensive as London or Oxford! Traditionally in China the husband's parents pay for the house or flat, and the wife's provide the furniture. (European decor is popular nowadays.) In Mexico a young married couple traditionally lives with the wife's mother while they save up for their first home. Is this a good beginning to married life we wondered?

Finding somewhere to rent in Oxford is very expensive. Most people seemed happy with their accommodation even if it is smaller than they are used to (apart from Shoko who very much appreciates her "semi" with its garden, in Marston.) Those from Brazil and Mexico are not used to having to pay for heating. And, even in the most modern houses, there aren't facilities for washing clothes except at the kitchen sink.

Nowadays, all property is advertised online and only the Property pages of the Oxford Times can be taken from Estate Agents, I find, unless you are a serious buyer. Not so Dorothy! Somehow she coerced several North Oxford Estate Agents to give some glossy brochures of a variety of properties to choose from, if money were no object!

"Homes" was the topic this week, and with 19 of us from 12 different countries, it proved a fascinating theme. We learned a lot, not least about the sophistication of Japanese and Korean loos, the absence of ovens in many countries, different views about washing-up, showers versus baths, whether shoes came off when entering a home, the different shapes of windows, and the strangeness of separate taps for hot and cold water in the UK.

Then Newcomers chose their own favourite Oxford house from a selection of brochures provided by local estate agents, and told us of the reasons for their choices.

Next week is our last meeting before Christmas, so we'll be talking about how Christmas is celebrated, or not, in different parts of the world, and New Year, of course.

PETS PART 1

Our theme was animals, but actually we only had time to share each other's pet stories.

Which seemed to be the most popular pet?

Dogs were mentioned most. In Brazil, the most popular are Dobermans, Pit Bull Terriers, Labradors and Poodles. Eric would love to own a dog, but feels it would not be practical as he and his wife work full time, if they're not both travelling! Many Brazilians buy dogs, but don't register them, or care for them, so they roam wild. Kiyumi and her husband from Japan both grew up with dogs; hers was a small neat Shibake, his was a large white crossbreed, which was exhausting to take on walks, but when he left home his mother looked after it! Fortunately their five year old daughter wants a cat which would not need exercising. Lu says Chihuahuas are popular in China because they are so tiny they can be carried around like a fashion accessory. Amalia from Costa Rica learned to love dogs because her father kept six, but not all at once. In Slovenia, as in Brazil, people buy a dog but are not able to look after it. If they can afford to, they pay for it to go to "Daycare for Pets", but others are left abandoned on the streets.

Other creatures

When Amalia and her husband embarked on their academic careers, the constant travelling made owning a dog impossible. But she did keep a rabbit. Its beautiful soft fur, a bit like a lion's mane, made it look huge. Her mother or her mother-in-law were only too happy to look after it when the couple needed to travel. But her mother was very distressed when it died in her care and she had to tell the family.

Elizabeth told us a story of a Dutch friend who took her sick hamster to the vet. He diagnosed a malignant tumour, but cured it with injections and it lived for several more years. To be honest, if our daughter's hamster had been ill I don't know if I would have taken it to the vet. (It was an adventurous creature, finding its way from her bedroom downstairs to the kitchen where it attacked a bunch of carrots.) Incidentally there are pet cemeteries in the Netherlands, and in other countries too, I believe.

Dorothy had a friend with a budgerigar who asked visitors, "Do you want to buy a battleship?" I guess the answer was usually "No thank you". But Junko's budgerigar has a wider vocabulary as it has been instructed by her daughter, Yuma. "I love you Yuma"; "My name is Polon"; "Play with me! Give me some snacks!" are its most common phrases, in Japanese of course. (Apparently male budgies are better imitators because during courtship they mimic the twitters of the female they wish to attract.) Once again it is the older generation who are now minding the pet. I wonder if he will be learning new words from Junko's mother-in-law who's currently caring for him? And will Yuma teach him English words when they are reunited next year?

Next week the theme is Royal Families. If your country does not currently have a king or queen perhaps you could find out if it ever did? I am sorry to miss this meeting as, apart from learning fascinating history, I love hearing Dorothy's stories of meeting the Queen. Make sure you ask her! The following week is half term and we'll be asking you to talk about traditional games in your country, and possibly to demonstrate them. Of course children will be particularly welcome on this occasion.

PETS PART 2

Last Thursday our topic was pets. Cats seemed to be the favourite pets among the group, even though all agreed they are creatures which prefer places to people. Martina showed us photos of her sleek Siamese cats who seem to have settled happily into their apartment in Marston. Fortunately they are intelligent enough to resist their homing instinct and attempt the journey back to Berlin. Mariona's glossy black cat in Catalonia was apparently quite restless when she and her husband were preparing for their trip to Oxford but is living in her parents' home, possibly not missing Mariona as much as Mariona is missing her! Rezeda says that in Russia cats are popular because most people live in small flats and haven't time to exercise a dog.

In Germany the most popular dog at the moment is a cross between a Labrador and a Poodle. Labradors are large, friendly dogs, and Poodles are intelligent and do not shed their hair, an ideal combination. In Germany, as in the UK, it is not unusual to see dogs on trains. In the UK people who work long hours sometimes employ a dog walker. The one who exercises Dorothy's daughter's dog writes a report on his often disobedient behaviour each time she takes him out. In China there is an industry growing up around dogs. Some are referred to as Teddy Dogs. You can buy them clothes and have their hair coloured and styled. Zhu showed us pictures! By contrast, in many countries, including the UK, dogs have to work, in field sports, for rounding up sheep or guarding property. Rezeda's Peruvian husband believes all animals should be kept outside, and mine would agree with him!

Meltem is disappointed not to see more dogs and cats on the streets in Oxford. In Turkey the local council looks after stray animals, providing food and shelter and vaccinating them against diseases. She told us the story of a dog which fell down a deep hole in the street. A group of high school children invented a contraption for rescuing him which apparently attracted the attention of Harvard University! Once released, the dog found a new owner and was none the worse for his adventures underground.

Besides dogs and cats, birds (ones like parrots and budgerigars which can talk to you), spiders and snakes are popular pets in Spain, and other countries too. Martina, growing up in Germany, kept rats of varying colours and sizes throughout her childhood, saying how affectionate they were, but sadly each one only lived two years.

For those who love riding, a horse or pony is expensive to buy and to keep, but Angelika solved this problem when her husband was working for five years in Geneva. They rented a farmhouse and the Swiss army paid for them to look after one of its horses! Switzerland is not known for its involvement in foreign wars, so there was nothing to stop Angelika exploring the Swiss countryside on horseback with the family dogs running behind. It was a large, heavy horse and her children's birthdays were celebrated by a day out in a horse drawn carriage instead of a more conventional party at their home.

Next week, June 8th, will be our last in the Lodgings at Queens College and we would like you to tell us what has surprised, pleased or disappointed you, about life in Oxford. It would also be really helpful to know what subjects or themes you would like in future meetings of the Conversation Group.