

Experience Abroad Reflection: History, Housing Cooperatives, and Hiking with New Friends in York, England

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Perhaps one might think that the UK is not different enough from Canada to really require cultural adjustment, especially given that Canada was a dominion of the United Kingdom until 1982 and many legacies of that remain. However, I think every country is different from the others, and I certainly felt that I was in an alien place when I traveled to England.

The differences began right off the bat when I took the train from the airport in London to York: unlike in Canada, where cars are by far the dominant mode of travel, the train network in the UK is fast, well-developed, and prioritizes passengers over freight. Zipping through the countryside on a London Northeast Railway train far faster than I've ever gone on VIA Rail felt like a step up. When I got to York, I struggled with the maze of different bus companies trying to find a bus that would take me to my apartment and becoming increasingly exhausted carrying my giant suitcase. Unlike in Toronto, there is no unified, publicly owned bus system. Moreover, because none of the landmarks used to demarcate direction were familiar, finding the right one was surprisingly difficult. The relief when I finally did reach my lovely flat, located in the working-class and student neighbourhood of Tang Hall, was enormous, but the cultural differences continued.



Arriving at my lovely room!

I went to a nearby grocery store and couldn't believe how expensive everything was. I knew that given Brexit and the currency conversion from CAD to pounds food would be more expensive, but I wasn't prepared for that degree of difference, and began to revise my budget in my head, swimming in panic. When I got back home, however, my lovely roommate Sarang laughed at me and told me I had accidentally gone to the most expensive grocery store in the city. It turned out that there were normally-priced ones nearby as well, but as an outsider I had no idea of the price (and

class) hierarchy of British grocery stores, a hierarchy that as far as I know doesn't really exist in Toronto.

That story is just one small illustration of what was by far the most important and rewarding aspect of my time abroad: the people. I had been warned that Brits might be colder and more reserved than Canadians, and so I wasn't expecting close friendships. I was hoping for cordial acquaintances. I could not have been more wrong. The people of York were some of the most open, friendly, and hospitable people I have ever met anywhere. My roommate was quick to consider me a friend, explaining countless cultural differences and nuances, showing me her favorite spots, and even going with me to a Shakespeare lecture. To give a representative example, she gave me a home-baked muffin on my first day! But it wasn't just her. My supervisor at work invited me to dinner with his family. I was able to make friends from going to community events, and people were happy to spend time with me even though they knew I would be gone in a few weeks. I was there during the World Cup, and I was able to bond with people through watch parties for the games. By the end, I knew more about soccer than I ever thought I would know, and my new friends were cheering for Canada, not just England, because of me! I genuinely believe the friends I made in York will be friends for life, and I continue to talk to most of them even now that I am back. When I marvelled at how friendly people were, they often responded by saying that this is a Northern characteristic, and that Northern people are much kinder than Southern people, especially Londoners. I learned all about how Northern England is distinct in everything from speech patterns to food, and how that is rooted in historical and economic divides that continue to shape people's lives.

Speaking of divides, it became clear immediately that the UK right now is politically divided and fractious in a way that made me grateful not to live there full-time. A group calling themselves Flag Force were putting up English flags everywhere, which sounds innocent but apparently signalled anti-immigrant and pro-nationalist ideology (especially using the English flag as distinct from the British flag). The cultural conflict over immigration and over LGBT acceptance was readily visible, and I witnessed more racism and homophobia/transphobia there than I have anywhere else. That being said, there were clearly initiatives to make the city more tolerant and kinder, and I do think that among British cities York is one of the least divided. We live in a time of wild geopolitics and brutal divisions, and Canada is no exception, but seeing how the political landscape of the UK functioned, especially post-Brexit, was fascinating.



A group promoting the movement to re-join the EU in a York square.

I have never been to a city more focused on history than York. York's economy is driven by tourism, which is driven by its gorgeous medieval streets and Viking and Roman artefacts. Physically and historically speaking, it could not be more different from Toronto, a thoroughly modern multicultural metropolis that only became Canada's most important city in the 1970s. York's historical bent isn't just to bring in tourist dollars, however: it was clear that people genuinely value history much more highly there, and learn it more than we do here. As a history nerd, I loved that. My first weekend there, I attended a massive Roman history festival where people were re-enacting battles with real Roman weapons. Imagine that happening in North America! I went to countless museums and historical buildings as well as history lectures and tours. I wish we had as sustained an interest in our own history as the British do; it has much to teach us. However, the focus on history also comes with a humming, palpable anxiety, a constant comparison of the Britain of today with the Britain of the past, the idea being that it is constantly being degraded away from an ideal, long-gone state of grace. One way in which this manifests itself is that Canada, although much less interested in and educated about history overall, has reckoned with the awful history of residential schools and Indigenous relations far more substantively than Britain has reckoned with its history of empire and brutal colonialism. Thus, in terms of history, I think Canada and the UK could each stand to learn from each other.



A view from York's medieval walls, which encircle the city and are still walkable.

Historical and cultural differences between the UK and Canada were highly relevant to the work I was doing in my LiA. I interned at Yorspace, a community land trust and affordable housing developer. The UK has a lot more social housing than Canada, but much of it is council housing that comes with a whole suite of socio-economic implications and is constantly vulnerable to privatization. Privatization in general has a much stronger hold in the UK than in Canada. Yorspace's *raison d'être* is to develop affordable housing that is not subject to rules that allow privatization, meaning that in order to understand the organization and do my work well, I also had to understand this structural and political difference. Planning rules based on the European framework as opposed to the North American also meant that what Yorspace is building could not be built in North America, because it is too dense and does not provide enough parking or car space. In terms of zoning, we can and should learn from the U.K (and Europe in general).



Beautiful and sustainable housing that would likely be illegal to build in Canada.

Following in that vein, the UK was much more oriented around walking and biking than Canada. Most streets in York had limited car access, making for a safe, vibrant, and sustainable city. The Right to Roam requires that every rural property have a pedestrian path through it, and I was able to take all day hikes with my friends to see historical landmarks, enjoying the gorgeous countryside along the way. In Canada, we do love our national parks, but getting to them requires a car. Walking from city to city is out of the question, and attempting it would probably lead to getting killed on a highway shoulder. Now that I am back in Canada, I miss the freedom afforded by human-centric rather than car-centric design.



One of the many lovely pedestrian paths that connect the countryside.

However, despite all the differences, there were some remarkable moments of unity I witnessed during my LiA, especially in the domain of place names. Many major streets in Toronto, and even the minor street I live on, had parallels in York. In fact, Toronto was once called York, a name that lives on in institutions such as York University and neighbourhood designations such as North York and East York. If that little piece of serendipity, that connection between two wildly different places, isn't enough to make you smile, there is an even unlikelier one.

On the weekends, I did some travelling around the UK, including to the coastal town of Scarborough. My fellow UofT scholars will know the name Scarborough as a suburb of Toronto, and some of them are even from there. When I arrived, I realized instantly that the shared name is not just a coincidence. The most prominent feature in both places are dramatic, beautiful bluffs. In the case of the UK, they look out over the North Sea, and in the case of Toronto, they look out over Lake Ontario, but the views are amazingly similar. Someone a long time ago must have come to Scarborough, Ontario having seen Scarborough, England, noticed the remarkable similarity, and given it that name. Most people in both places will never have reason to know about that connection, but now I do. To me, that drives home the point that not only can travel expand your horizons, it can teach you things about home that you never would have learned otherwise and make the familiar full of awe.

