

England June 10-14

I would not have visited England at all this year were it not for the patronage of the miraculous Maecenas , Ilyas Kahn: billionaire financier, philanthropist, publisher, mathematics and philosophy enthusiast! The experience is worth a report in itself.

Ireland, Belgium and France were already on my list: Ireland because it was time to pay another visit to sculptor John Behan; Belgium because of a circle of new friends generated through the Pen-Pal propensities of Facebook ; France for Paris, the Institut Poincaré and the Avignon Theatre Festival.

However ,in April Ilyas Kahn, about whom I at the time knew nothing, contacted me by E-mail. He'd studied the contents of the folder on Ferment Magazine devoted to Alexandre Grothendieck. Now he wanted to know if there was a way to approach Grothendieck to give him a grant from his Stanhill Foundation. How old was Grothendieck? What about his health? Was he financially secure? Was he still doing creative work as a mathematician? How could a well-wisher send him money?

After receiving this message I went to the Internet to find out more about him:



Ilyas Kahn

Ilyas Khan, merchant banker, patron of the football team Accrington Stanley, founder and publisher of the Asia Literary Review, chairman of the prominent British charity Leonard Cheshire Disability , a member of the British Wittgenstein Society, senior partner of Stanhill Capital Partners, a founding directors of Australia-based White Energy Company, founder of Touchstone Gold, trustee of the Christian Heritage Centre at Stonyhurst, collector of first editions of the works of Henry James, Lawrence Durrell and George Gissing.

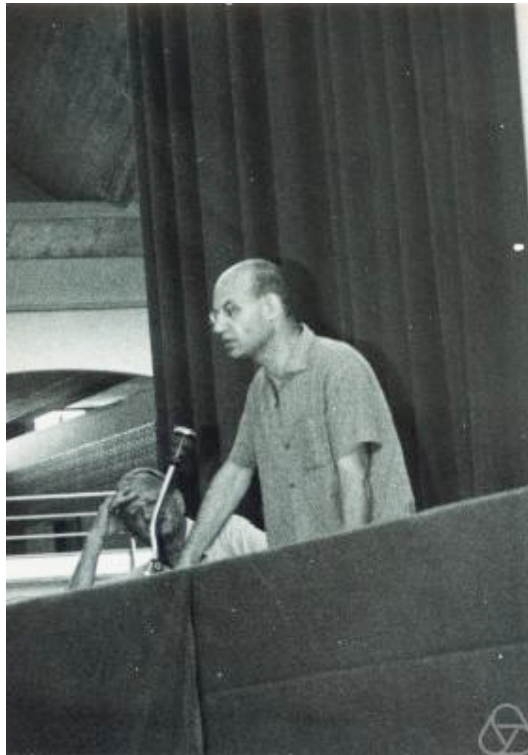
A picture of him with his wife ,Mara Hotung:



Accrington Stanley saviour Ilyas Khan and his wife Mara Hotung put on their running shoes on Sunday to cross the London Marathon finishing line in 5 hours 2 0 minutes . The pair were two of 80 runners who helped Leonard Cheshire Disability to raise well over £140,000.

<http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/local-news/ilyas-khan-and-wife-mara-are-run-away-888568>

And who is Alexandre Grothendieck? For the sake of those readers who may not know of him, why he is famous, or why there is such concern about him, I will add a few pages of background:



Alexandre Grothendieck Nice 1970

Alexandre Grothendieck's biography is gripping reading, quite apart from the fact that he is one of the legendary research mathematicians of the 20th century. Suffice it to say that, in addition to having made major contributions to several other fields of mathematics, he is responsible for the total overhaul of the field of Algebraic Geometry to its modern form. Of course he did not do it alone- several

other major figures , Saunders MacLane, Jean Leray, Jean-Pierre Serre, and Jean Dieudonne, need to be added to the list. However in this field he outpaces them all. He is the pioneer, trail-blazer, and the paradigm; in all respects a formidable figure.



Montreal 1970

The modern version of Algebraic Geometry provided the context and language for the proof of Fermat's Last Theorem by Andrew Wiles in 1994.

He rose quickly to prominence in 1955. At the age of 27 this makes him a late starter in terms of the history of mathematics; before that year his aptitudes were seen as good, yet not remarkable. This is not surprising when one considers his extremely turbulent trajectory as a

child war refugee in Germany and France, between 1928 and 1945. The details may be found in any number of biographical accounts, including my own at:

<http://www.fermentmagazine.org/Quest88.html>

(Scroll down to page 22)

Starting in 1955, AG worked at mathematical research for as much as 12 hours a day, 7 days per week, for the next 15 years. Such intense concentration is unprecedented, and indicates the possible presence of an extreme mental pathology. Sadly, this diagnosis has turned out to be the case.

In 1970, having done the life's work of 5 mathematicians in the space of 15 years, he abruptly quit the field, turned to radical politics, gave up all of his prestigious Parisian appointments, and returned to Montpellier where he and his mother had lived since leaving the refuge of Le Chambord in 1945. There he took up an ordinary job teaching basic mathematics to undergraduates at the Université Paul Valéry!

In the 1980's, he moved to the tiny village of Mormoiron near Avignon in the Vaucluse to live , as a hermit, from his retirement pensions .

Then in 1988 he was awarded the mathematics prize of the Crafoord Foundation in Sweden, valued at 16×10^6 cents, an equal amount to be given to a former student, unjustly demonized by him, Pierre

Deligne. The reasons for his rejection of this prize were outlined in a letter (May 5, 1988) sent to Le Monde:

In the two decades that have intervened the ethical standards of the sciences (certainly in mathematics) have been degraded to such an extent that the most bare-faced plagiarism between colleagues (often at the expense of those who can't defend themselves), seems to have become the norm. At least it is generally tolerated, even in exceptionally flagrant instances. .

Given this situation, were I to agree to enter into the game of prizes and rewards, it would be equivalent to my giving stamp of approval to a state of affairs in today's sciences that I see as being profoundly unhealthy. Their spiritual state, even their intellectual and material states, are nothing less than suicidal, hence they are destined to vanish in the near future.

After reading this letter I knew that I had to go to the south of France to uncover his hideout and talk to him. The story of this search is no longer available on the Internet, although my interviews with him are.

Around 1992, he fled to an even more remote location on the outskirts of the town of Saint-Girons in the Pyrenees. From his mountain redoubt he proclaimed that he would not be receiving any visitors (including relatives or even his own children) apart from a select list of former students.

However, in 1995, with my assistance, his whereabouts were traced by mathematicians Leila Schneps and Pierre Lochak. Despite his pronouncements they were welcomed at first, but eventually swept out the door. Now they have only occasional communications with the great man.

Alexandre Grothendieck's whereabouts are common knowledge by now: he lives in a chalet on the outskirts of Saint-Girons a tourist town in the Pyrenees.



Alexandre Grothendieck's House in St. Girons

In 2003, Leila, Pierre, myself, philosopher of science Colin McClarty, editor Harvey Shoolman and mathematics historian Alain Herreman, set up a website called the Grothendieck Circle; it is devoted to AG's works, memorabilia, photos, biographical accounts, mathematical works, and essays that explain and interpret them.

This has been not well received by him: in recent years, AG has taken to calling up libraries and editors, demanding that (apart from a small personally approved list) they remove and even burn his books. He contacted Leila Schneps and let her know that the Grothendieck Circle was “an abomination”. Submitting to his paranoia, she has gutted the Grothendieck Circle site of much of its content.

This is somewhat at variance with a strange event that occurred around 1994. One of the former students permitted access to him is Dr. Jean Malgoire, professor at the university in Montpellier. One day, so the story goes, he arrived at the house in Saint Giron, to find Dr. Grothendieck hurrying out the door dragging several boxes of papers. He announced to Dr. Malgoire that he’d anointed him as his literary executor, bestowing all publication rights to whatever he’d published and that would be published by him in the future, to him!

All this and more can be learned from the Grothendieck Folder on Ferment Magazine, and the Grothendieck Circle.

www.fermentmagazine.org/home5.html

www.grothendieckcircle.org

At the time he got in touch with me, Ilyas Kahn sent a similar query to Leila Schneps, and presumably to other members of the Grothendieck Circle.



Leila Schneps

Leila, a researcher in Algebraic Geometry, author of 6 mystery novels and some important translations, has far more experience in dealing with the foibles of Grothendieck than I do. She was therefore in a better position to answer his questions. Leila replied simply that Grothendieck does not take kindly to such offers. (*My translation: flies into a rage*) His pensions, so he insists, are sufficient for his needs. (*My interpretation: He really believes the holy man legend he's invented about himself.*) He intends to continue to live as a hermit. Leila would not give Ilyas Alexandre's address without his permission, which he will never give. As it is, he rarely communicates even with her, and she is probably the one person on earth most devoted to his welfare. Furthermore, as Leila and I both know, one visits AG at one's own risk. To date no-one has been directly attacked, but there have been some close skirmishes.

My reply to Ilyas' query was not as irrevocable as Leila's, though I ended up saying more or less the same thing: Alexandre Grothendieck, in a manner somewhat similar to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, interprets gifts and awards as personal threats. The conversation with Ilyas via E-mail continued for awhile. Finally he offered *me* a grant! 250 pounds when I visited England, plus an invitation to stay with him and his family at Hatton House in the elite London suburb of Windlesham.

He'd also read the account on Ferment Magazine of my visit to Cambridge, England in August 2011. In this article I write of having lunch with the director of the Wittgenstein Archive, Michael Nedo. It turns out that Ilyas is also a Wittgenstein enthusiast and a member of the British Wittgenstein Society.

The conversation went back and forth. Ilyas asked me what I knew about Grigory Perelman, another somewhat unbalanced mathematician who, after putting the final touches on a proof of the Poincaré Conjecture, rejected the Fields Medal, rumored to be the mathematics equivalent of the Nobel Prize. (*Many of us maintain that Richard Hamilton did most of the work, while Perelman has been doing all the grand-standing*). Did I agree with Ilyas that Grothendieck and Perelman have a similar psychological profile? What did I think of these big cash awards given for mathematical proofs of famous conjectures? Were they helpful or harmful to the field? (Basically I think that these prizes will be irrelevant to the history of mathematics over the long run.

Mathematics is unique as a profession which denies the contributions of amateurs, but their work is indispensable.)



Hatton House

I arrived at Hatton House on the afternoon of June 10, went to Cambridge between the 11th and 12th, returned to Hatton House on June 13th, went down to London on the 14th, then took a Eurostar train to Brussels. The arrangements for coming to Hatton House resulted in some confusion. A British Airways flight from Dublin brought me to Heathrow at 1 in the afternoon.

Ilyas never made his peace with the fact that I don't use a cell phone. For a businessman and conference organizer this is one of the basic accoutrements of civilized mortals! Via an E-Mail I picked up in Dublin, one of his secretaries let me know that there would be a limousine waiting for me at the Arrivals area of Heathrow when I arrived.

Everything went off without a hitch until I reached the area in which the black slatted merry-go-rounds deliver the suitcases. A crowd of passengers stood there waiting for over an hour, while the mechanisms remained stuporous. Around 2 I asked an airport attendant where I could find a pay phone to make a call to the Stanhill Foundation. He did more than that; using his own mobile phone we connected with another Stanhill Foundation secretary; he transmitted my message to the limousine service. When I finally did emerge from into the Arrivals lounge around 3, a Pakistani driver was waiting for me, holding up a sign with "Roy Lisker" scratched onto it .

The glistening black agency limousine that he commanded had been designed to translate the rich, famous and powerful to their intended locations with maximal ostentation; and indeed, people in my vicinity made way for me as if I were someone special! The driver, a man in his 40's, was nothing if not talkative. I asked him what his opinion was about the news for that day: the Taliban had attacked an airport in Pakistan and 78 people were killed in the gunfight.

In his opinion, the Taliban are not the real problem in Pakistan. They could be vanquished in a short time. It is the government that is hopelessly corrupt! In evidence he cited the properties in the center of London worth many millions of pounds, all owned by close relatives of the ruling elite. His solution, which he screamed in a register just short

of falsetto, was : *“Kill everyone of them! Kill all the families of all the politicians in Pakistan! Kill them all! Then we will have peace.”*

Given that even disagreement with such rhetoric might constitute a kind of endorsement, I politely said nothing. Instead I leaned back into the plush velvet cushions and enjoyed the countryside.

After less than an hour the limousine entered onto a winding road holding large estates on both sides. For the most part one only caught a glimpse of them from the road, but one could see enough to judge their amplitude. Finally the limousine pulled up to a pair of gates; the driver got out and poked in a code in a box at eye level, the gates creaked open and we entered the domain of Ilyas Kahn.



Ilyas and Mara, with family

Painted in pastels of chrome yellow, white and grey and surrounded by gardens of flowers in full bloom, the 4-story mansion stood like a chess piece stranded in a flowering meadow. As the limousine pulled up to the door, we were greeted by a pair of house servants, two Filipino women one of them not much higher than 5 feet, the other smaller even than that: Yaya and Naymy. Yaya was clearly in charge; Naymy may be her

daughter. She took my luggage to the center of the hall and invited me to the dining-room off to the right. After washing up in a bathroom filled with quaint Victorian pictures, I entered the dining-room and sat down at a thick wooden table proportioned 1 person by 3; 8 persons in all, with capacity to squeeze in another 4.

Yaya served me an excellent ham and cheese omelette. Two dogs, one black the other brown, both very large old, came up to me on each side of my chair. They never did seem to understand that I wouldn't feed them anything from the table, though they never held it against me. While eating I met several other people in the Ilyas Kahn entourage: his wife, Mara, another secretary, Jane, and his two sons, both younger than 10: Joshua and Elijah.

Yaya informed me that Ilyas Kahn was around; he wanted to give me time to clean up and take a nap, and suggested that he and I get together around 5:30 or so, before going in to dinner.

After lunch Yaya walked me up to the 4th floor. There were perhaps 4 bedrooms on this floor, and others on the lower floors as well, indicating that the building served as a conference center as well as the personal residence of Ilyas and his family. My room was in an alcove all to itself, with a bathroom facing the room. On the tables of the bedroom were many photographs of Ilyas and several generations of family members. There were no other surfaces available, such as tables or shelves for

putting, unfolding or opening things. I sank into the large double bed and quickly fell asleep.

I was up again in about an hour. Coming down the winding staircase I could see that all of the large rooms were filled with materials representing Ilyas' wide range of interests in science, the arts and education. One of the rooms held items of Christian art, the most spectacular being a large porcelain crucifixion against one of the walls: the chapel. I apologize, but only the Christians have this "in your face" arrogance about their logo.

Waiting for Ilyas to arrive, Yaya made me comfortable on a circular couch facing the TV in a basement room. There had been lots of news that week, most of it terrible. Good news does not sell newspapers.

Coverage on the BBC was about the civil war in Iraq, a sex scandal in a school in Rochdale that had been kept secret for 14 years, and of course the World Cup. The Irish babies-and-mothers scandal appeared as a moving line underneath the image. No mention was made of the shocking revelations of slavery in the fishing industry in Thailand, covered in impressive detail in a fine example of investigative journalism in that week's Guardian.

At last Ilyas made his entrance. Everyone else in his household including servants, wife and children, are short, but Ilyas himself is very tall. Though clearly with origins in the Middle East, he was born in the

UK and he speaks with a cultivated British accent. In step with his enthusiasm for mathematics, his dark blue tee shirt prominently displayed the most famous formula of mathematical analysis, $e^{i\pi} = -1$

Ilyas sat down on the bend in the couch to my left; we immediately began a conversation around a rich mix of subjects: Grothendieck, the Grothendieck Circle, John Nash, Wittgenstein, Perelman, Bertrand Russell, Gore Vidal. He has published a novel by Gore Vidal. To get around the copyright laws they donated the royalties to the Red Crescent. He suggested this as an example of the kind of thing I might do to publish my translations of the essays of Rene Thom. Then he passed me an envelope with the 250 pounds he'd promised me and gave me advice regarding things I could do in my two days in Cambridge.

For dinner we joined the family, Mara, Joshua and Elijah, Ilyas and myself. Ilyas asked if I was a "believer". Well, not really. All the same he invited me to say grace before dinner. I consented; I am not a fanatical atheist. Whether or not the Supreme Being (A living creature? A prime mover? A set of equations?) exists is His own business. "Thank you O Lord" I said, "for the food we are about to receive, not forgetting that it is denied to most of the world." Yaya once again proved herself to be an excellent cook: salmon, green beans and potatoes.

After dinner Ilyas disappeared again. He is kept perpetually busy following up his responsibilities and his manifold whims. I saw him again, briefly, the next morning. Mara drove me to the train station in

nearby Sunningdale to catch an 8:15 train to London, and from there to Cambridge where I would spend the day, all of the next day, and the following morning before returning to Hatton House on the evening of Friday, June 13.

Cambridge, England

June 11-13

(Note: There is a super-abundance of information about Ilyas Kahn on the Internet, and even more about his wife, Mara Hotung Kahn. One discovers that they are integrally connected to all the clans of the super-rich around the world, principally in England, the United States, and Hong Kong. It would be impolite to my hosts to bring up everything that one naturally expects to find in their family quarrels; one can easily research them for oneself.)

On the morning of June 11 I came down to the kitchen/dining room on the ground floor of Hatton House at the early hour of 7. There I met Mara's mother, Patricia Shea Hotung, an aged invalid in a wheelchair. Placed at the corner of the dining table, she was being fed and generally attended to by a woman caretaker. When I told Mrs. Hotung that I lived in Middletown, Connecticut, she nodded, then explained that she came from Greenwich, one of the wealthy coastal towns of that state.

Yaya indicated where I could exit the estate to take a walk. The roadway connected a succession of estates, with names like Peachtree, Woodlane, and Hatton Manor. A walk of 20 minutes was sufficient. The

weather had been on the chilly side since leaving Boston on May 29th, with a suggestion of rain always in the air. I returned to the dining room to find Mara and the two boys, Elijah and Joshua already at the table. Ilyas wasn't there. We did have a conversation again when I came back on the evening of the 13th.

At 8 AM Mara put the boys in the car, with me on the seat at front left (it being England) . After dropping them off at the local boarding school she drove me to the train station in Sunningdale, a few miles away. The journey to and from Cambridge comes to 60 pounds (\$102) which I thought rather high. From previous visits to England I'd come to understand that train transportation, in the country where the locomotive was invented, is erratic, capricious and expensive, another consequence of the economic revolution of Margaret Thatcher.

The 3-hour trip divided into 3 phases: a train from Sunningdale to Waterloo station; a tube journey across London to King's Cross Station; then a final train from there to Cambridge. Three hours minimum, because complications can arise in the Tube connection that oblige one to catch a later train: in both on-going and out-going phases I boarded the trains with literally seconds to spare.

I arrived in Cambridge , more or less without incident, shortly after 11 (though I must mention the coughing fit that racked my frail constitution (!) on the leg from Waterloo to Cambridge, the tail end of the cold picked up in Galway) .



Cambridge Train Station

From the moment one exits the Cambridge train station one must confront the dangers of the city's traffic. In addition to a bewildering system of red and green stoplights, there are the large double-decker buses and, unavoidably, the sea of bicycles. The difference between run over by a car and hit by a bicycle should be obvious. However the car, if it is operating normally, can stop on a 10-pence piece, while a bicycle takes a much longer time, and may even have problems stopping altogether. The bicycles in Cambridge flow from everywhere like swarms of Myrmidons. There appears to be a kind of inverse snobbery at work: if you ask someone which bus to take to get to a certain part of town, he or she are likely to reply, with a touch of fierce pride in their eyes, "I don't take the bus; I ride my bicycle!"

Recall the classic Cambridge bicycle story: in his autobiography, Bertrand Russell remarks that, as he descended from his bicycle, he realized after 15 years of marriage that he didn't love his first wife, Alyss. This launched a lifelong preoccupation with debauchery, much exaggerated by himself and others.



Cambridge Youth Hostel

The Cambridge Youth Hostel is only a short distance away from the train station on Tennison Street. It's just gone through major structural and functional innovations, and certainly looks very modern and attractive, a stylishly chic Bauhaus.

Although everything looks as if it were tailor-made to one's specifications, yet little in its precincts is actually user-friendly. The doors are thick and heavy, grinding open on springs which stick. Even an adult has to make an effort to open them, and the population in youth hostels consist largely of children and teen-agers. The damage done to my right elbow when its spring action closed the door on me, is still hurting 4 months later.

These anti-humanistic tendencies are reproduced in the bedrooms. To store luggage one must use heavy, brightly polished, wooden coffin-like boxes under the beds that require a strong effort to pull out onto the floor. Because their lids open from a hinge in the

middle, half of the box is inaccessible to anyone but a contortionist. This is a bit of a shame, as all of the smaller items slide to the back of the box, and cannot be retrieved without bruising one's arms on the lid. No tables, no chairs.

The bathrooms are comparable in size to the toilet stalls in trains. The fixtures, however, are as handsome as one could wish! The sinks are so small that it is impossible for the average human being to get both hands under the faucet; thus there is no satisfactory way to bathe one's face without wetting one's clothing. The trash baskets in these bathrooms are also very tiny. Since one finds signs in the bathrooms reminding one that one should not stuff paper towels in the toilets, one finds the floors covered two or three deep in paper towels that will not fit into these trash baskets.

And so forth and so on: some features of the new modernized hostel seem to be designed for midgets, others for giants, with huge gaps for all persons in between.

The items of the free breakfast provided for hostel residents are by-and-large inedible, but that's hardly news in England. The low cost dinners were much better. Despite these shortcomings I recommend it as a residence for travelers. It is kept very clean, it is safe and convenient, the price is low, the staff are really first rate.

An added side benefit to the Cambridge hostel is that it is essentially free from the nagging propaganda for environmental

consciousness one finds in so many youth hostels. There may be a sign by the elevator that says "Be Green! Walk!" Another one by the roll of toilet paper may advise "Use less paper! Save a tree!" Going to the sink to wash up, you're likely to find a picture of an emaciated African child with the information "You can get your water by turning a faucet. He has to walk 8 miles for his water." The guilt trips are endless, the messages childish or even stupid. In the Brussels Sleep-Well hostel I ate breakfast sitting before a list of suggestions on pieces of cardboard : "Don't waste your food", "Clear your dishes" "Enjoy your meal"; on and on

The Cambridge hostel is free of such humiliations. There are plenty of grown-up conservationist and environmentalist organizations in Cambridge itself; one doesn't need instructions on how to be a good little boy.

In many respects this was not a good time of the year for visiting Cambridge. The exam period - that interlude in which people who claim to know something test others to reassure themselves that these others agree with them - had officially begun only the day before, students were cramming around the clock, (in ancient China they would have been sticking their asses with awls); professors were studying Wikipedia for the answers to the questions they posed on the test sheets; nobody would have any time for me.

However, Cambridge is more than just a college town, although I discovered by a few random walks that there must be more universities and colleges here than anywhere on earth (save possibly Cambridge and Boston in the US, where they are spread over a much wider territory). There are 32 colleges associated with the University of Cambridge alone.

It is also is a town with 15 museums, with open markets, a restaurant magnet, a focus for theater and music, a Disneyland of historical buildings and monuments, and much else besides.

It could be argued in fact that this was the *best* time of the year to visit the city. In the absence of the “gown”, the “town” could come into its own. Students, teachers and researchers were tied up in their work and the streets were relatively empty . Instead of screwing up the nerve to barge in on Stephen Hawking, Roger Penrose or Michael Nedo, I could visit the museums, savor the restaurants and talk to the people in the streets without worrying that I might be wasting my time by not seeking out wisdom from the sages scattered across the colleges.



Market Square

My two days would therefore be spent in the company largely of “ordinary” people: the bus drivers for example. Some of them were helpful, others wouldn’t give me the time of day; one simply said “Yes” when I asked him anything. There is one incident in particular worth recording.

I’d been given the impression that the City Centre and the Market Square were in the same place. Many of the buses departing from the train station do go to “City Centre”. So I took my place in a bus stall and waited. Three buses were listed on an electronic panel as going there; they took a very long time arriving, much longer than the times posted on the panel. Finally one showed up and I got on.

Everything went according to plan; the bus trundled down St. Andrews Street, which does in fact go to the Market Square. Then the bus took a sharp turn and drove along a big park and picnic area called Parkside. I remember thinking that it might be nice to spend the afternoon there. But suddenly I realized that we weren’t going to the Market Square at all. So I got up out of my seat and went to the front of the bus to talk to the driver.

“I thought this bus was going to the city’s center.”

“Sir, this is the city centre.”



Guildhall

“Aren’t you going to Guildhall? (Where the Tourist Information Office is located.)

“I don’t know where that is.”

“Lion’s Yard?” (The enormous shopping mall and arcade on the east side of Market Square)

“Never heard of it.”

While this dialogue was going on, a number of irate passengers in various ways, expressing their indignation that I was holding up the line when they wanted to get off. What? Human Nature is exactly the same in the UK that it is in the US? I had to get off.

It was a balmy day, I was not in a hurry; so I walked about the neighborhood a bit. To my right were the Anglia Ruskin College and the Mumford Theatre: Cambridge sprouts colleges the way banyan trees grow arms! After asking 3 people who gave me those eager misleading directions we all give when we want to be helpful but don’t know anything, I met someone who pointed out that the Lion’s Yard was directly catty-corner to where I was and that the best way to get there was

to walk through the Parkside. Picnickers covered the lawns, circus tents were being dismantled, vans were situated here and there with people sitting outside in chairs and under canopies.

So I got my wish: a lazy stroll through this charming park, followed by an hour sitting in a tavern, “The Fountains”, in its large frontal space open to the street , staring at people and feeling like a million guineas! The fruits of errors and mistakes can so often be so much more rewarding than one’s intending goals! In fact, that’s what’s wrong with our schools: they teach children to be ashamed of making mistakes, instead of cherishing them as rare gifts.



Lion's Yard