

SLEYING the REED



Text by Christic Moral

The days grow shorter, trees senesce, yellow and shed as autumn fades into winter. As the initial buzz of a new academic year subsides, it becomes easy to fall into routine and be rapt in the rhythm of studying. Yet this monotony can be broken by meaningful connections, unexpected encounters and new experiences, which are all the more important as winter arrives. Studying overseas offers unique opportunities to do just that and it invites us to find community in new places. With the seasons drifting, Wildon recounts the experiences he is grateful for in the UK, from being welcomed into the fold by some veteran football supporters to discovering purpose in a community that matters to him.

Christic is a second-year medical student at King's College London and is the Editor of the 31st SMSUK executive committee.



Text and photos by Wildon Tan

I have contributed a few articles to this column now, initially with the intention to practise my creative writing and to share my experiences and what they mean to me. It is only when a reader reached out to me by email about his son having secured a place in Bristol that I realised just how far my personal reflections have reached our medical fraternity in Singapore. I am always happy to hear about a fellow Singaporean joining Bristol; I have been very grateful to my seniors who welcomed me into this unfamiliar city with open arms and hope to extend it to my juniors too. Coming to an overseas university for the first time can be a daunting experience!

Having gone through the "first-year" experience twice at two different universities (one at medical school in Bristol, and another to do my master's degree in Cambridge), what stood out is the importance of a community. At both institutions, building a community was not easy, and I had my fair share of difficulties finding the right circle. Though I do not sew, I know that handling threads may not come together nicely

on the first try. But once it falls into place, the pattern begins to take shape. In the same way, once I found my community, it became my anchor, and this act of sleying the reed must be important.

My inspiration for this article came from a recent interview. Seniors had advised that there might be some small talk at the beginning. However, even with that knowledge, the first question took me aback.

"Wildon... so you study in Bristol. Is it true that there's nothing to do in Bristol?"

Already nervous, I was caught off guard. Having spent a year in Cambridge the year before and having absolutely loved it, I was compelled to defend the city where I started my medical degree. I gave a generic answer about the Cotswolds (*stunning place, mind*) but did not do Bristol any justice. Sensing my nervousness, the interviewer clarified that he wondered if all students outside London do is study as he observed good academic performances. What followed was probably 30 minutes of disappointing him and crushing this assumption.*

Finding my community

The funny thing about community is that you find them in the places you least expect to, and anyone who knows me well knows that I am a loyal Bristol Rovers supporter. How I came to support "the Gas" (as they are known) is odd. I used to play football in Singapore for the AC Milan scouting plant in Singapore, and I remember how rich investors bought over the club and my Italian coach, whom I looked up to, lost his job overnight. It was then that I swore not to support a rich club, but a local one. When I arrived in Bristol, there were two football teams to pick from. I will not mention the other one out of pettiness, but I did not like the atmosphere there. When I watched the Rovers, I was hooked from the first game. The football was (and is still) not great, but the people there were passionate about football, and they regularly burst into songs. It kept me going back.

Once when I was at the football, singing along to one of the chants, an old man tapped me on the shoulder. "Excuse me, young man. I don't want to put you off from your lovely support, but you can't sing."

A bit harsh, I thought, but in all fairness, my low, monotonous voice could probably kill a bird when I sang. After some back-and-forth banter, I found out that this man's name was Andrew. Along with Geoff, Ian, Adrian and Dave, they have given me the apt nickname, "Mono". Every home game, you can expect to see them at the same spot, rain or shine. I have also been added to their WhatsApp group where we talk about football, and it is great to be able to ask about their weeks or talk about their jobs before they retired and the nice holidays they go on.

When I asked Geoff why I was accepted into their little crew, given that I was the "new kid", he shared how he noticed that I went to the games alone, and in his 66 years of following the Gas, he knew what that was like.

On the footballing side, the fanbase of Bristol Rovers is known to be very tribal, formed by people who are local to the area. Everyone has a West Country accent and is very passionate about the team. In fact, if you go to the local hospital, Southmead Hospital, a good proportion of both patients and staff support the Gas. There are some amazing football stories I have witnessed, from winning 7-0 on the

final day to secure promotion and seeing the likes of Elliot Anderson and Jarrell Quansah play before they rose to Premier League fame. I have experienced the lows of the football club as well, having a long drive back home after losing an "away day", and seeing the club get relegated last season, yet it is still the only football team that I would ever think to support.

Home at Bristol

I must admit that Bristol was hardly my first choice, but when it came to putting four universities in the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service form, it was done with much prayer. Many of my smarter peers had the luxury or dilemma of choosing between different universities. My path was quite clear – I only had the option of Bristol, and that was where I went. For me, finding a Christian community when I moved to England was important. It is, after all, a country with a rich Christian heritage. I started going to a small, reformed church slightly north of the city. It did not have a full-time pastor and I was the only student in attendance, but I think that helped me to contribute to the community better. By helping to set up and pack away the halls before and after the service,

and to record and upload the sermons online, I felt that I could contribute to that community in my small effort. In Cambridge, I went to a reformed church an hour's drive outside of Cambridge and met another Singaporean student, whom I offered to drive every week. It was largely a big farming community in that town, and besides the good spiritual encouragement, they exposed me to the world of farming, from building fences to combine harvesters. I would have never had this experience in Singapore. Ultimately, I am glad to have formed these communities where I can chat about my problems, and they can encourage me with both practical and spiritual advice.

Being on the ward daily, I enjoy getting to know the patients, and having knowledge of the locality has benefitted me in building rapport with most of them.^{*} Even after having spent four years here, I doubt I sound anything like a Brit. I have picked up the vocabulary, but still butcher the intonation of certain words, and most patients are still surprised to find out that I am from Singapore.

Recently, I had some setbacks in medicine, but my community and best friend reminded me that I am in Bristol for a reason – a call to work faithfully and diligently no matter where I am placed. Looking back, these years abroad have shown me what it means to be held by a community, be it in faith, friendship or shared purpose. I have been a recipient of kindness, patience and care, and hope that at the end of my degree, I will return to Singapore and extend it to others. ◀

**I promise that I study hard during the week. I am in the wards/library from 9 am to 5 pm, and my clinical teaching fellows will vouch for me.*

#Not just football, many patients do like to talk about the Cotswolds in the area I am working in now. Horses, gilet and tweed sometimes get brought up in conversation.

Wildon is a fourth-year medical student from the University of Bristol, who has completed a Master of Philosophy in Medical Science (Medicine) at the University of Cambridge.



Geoff (left), Andrew (middle), and me at a recent Rover's game



Farewell lunch with my church family in Baldock (near Cambridge). I miss them very much