Letters to the Antipodes - I

Okay first off:

My residence at this time is:

    Andrew Moore
    88 Barton Road
    Cambridge CB3 9LH
    UK

    01-223-368-851 (I think its 0011-44-1-223-368-851 from Australia)

Not permanent, I wont be in this place beyond September (it is needed by the college)

work is:

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    01-223-334-760 (w)
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Certainly a more permanent, if longer, address.

Email: andrew.moore(AT)cl.cam.ac.uk, although my old mail addresses still work and just forward the mail onto me here.

The flight across was slow but uneventful, Auckland has a very nice airport and Los Angeles airport was crumby. I got up from Heathrow by bus (direct, about 1hr 20min, slower than the train, but cheaper and no having to lug luggage around at Kings Cross station). First evening I stayed in a nice little Bed and Breakfast, I got into Cambridge around 1pm but was pretty tired and that was the end of that.

The next two nights I stayed as a guest of a Fellow of Fitzwilliam, a very nice college, relatively new, all quite pleasant. On Thursday, 4th, I moved into 88 Barton Road. (I couldn't move into Barton Road earlier because Corpus Christi did not open until the 4th of January.) I spent a little time investigating, although most of the city and university was really closed until later in that week. Interesting, Fitzwilliam College is on about the only hill in Cambridge.

The place I am in at 88 Barton Rd., is very large by English standards I am in a room about 10x15' with a BIR, sadly it is a cold room, the heater is noisy (has air in it) and it is like sleeping next to a waterfall. Happily the cost of heating is included in the rent (this is not always the case apparently).

The rest of the house is quite nice, two other rooms much the same size, bathroom and toilet upstairs with another bedroom, kitchen, pantry, living-room downstairs, the place is on a decent sized block of land (no I haven't measured it,) but is a little overgrown. I get the distinct impression, this being one of the houses furthest away from the centre of the graduate complex, it gets the least attention.

I share with three graduate students, at this stage I have only met one, the others are staying away from college as long as possible. 16th of Jan marks the beginning of the Lent term (the 2nd of three) so I expect I will meet them in due course.

The College I am staying with (I am not a "PART" of the college as such, as I am >JUST< a visitor, the porters enjoy making this clear to anyone who is uncertain of their situation,) has a graduate complex about a mile (oops, a kilometre and a half) East of the town centre. It is centred around a large, older, home called "Leckhampton" at any rate the whole complex (consisting of many local homes, Leckhampton itself, and a large modern building on the Leckhampton estate) is referred to as Leckhampton now.

Leckhampton, apart from housing the local warden, several residents and various offices, also contains the graduate-only dining facilities a general purpose room, and a TV room.

The grounds are very pretty (everything is so GREEN.) Although I have not really done a comprehensive tour, there are sporting fields of one sort and another as well as a rose garden and at the bottom of the garden is a swimming pool, not used in the current weather (no surprise there), but very popular in summer.

The Leckhampton complex and its houses and gardens are all set back a considerable distance from the local road, so it is very quiet. Having walked around Cambridge a bit more, it becomes apparent this is the "college" side of town, with a considerable amount of land dedicated to the college's, college playing fields and so on, all very attractive.

In the house there is no shower, we have one of those silly attachments to the bath taps (Y-shaped thingo). Trouble is the water heater is nearby and hot water being gravity fed in the UK (maybe just England?) means you have to be careful not to scald your feet and freeze your head. A popular shower system in homes nowadays is an "electric" shower. It is fed with cold water, at mains pressure and heats it on the way to the shower head. Alas we don't have one of those.

I will never take mains pressure hot water for granted again !

Interesting, there have been amazing water shortages throughout the UK, typically due to burst mains and/or the incompetence of local water management authorities (one authority didn't do its book-keeping correctly and found out it had sent all its reserve into adjacent counties, along comes a drought and there was discussion of water rationing in certain places, quite extraordinary.) On New Years Day there were estimated to be 500,000 homes without water, added to that many without electricity over Xmas and what a woeful time it would have been for many.

In contrast, there is a general attitude that causes considerable waste of water. Apart from baths being the norm, just about every tap I have encountered needs a new washer, particularly the cold water taps.

The house I am in is blessed with a washing machine/tumble drier (residents in other parts of the Leckhampton graduate centre all trudge with their washing to a central facility) so there are minor benefits to being in a place out of the centre of the action.

(In truth, nothing is "out of the centre of the action" it takes me about 15 minutes to walk to work. My workplace is close to the centre of the town.)

Well the house I am in has a full kitchen (albeit an electric cook-top) so I could probably quite happily never use any other facilities around (and for the others in the house, this is the general case.)

Leckhampton offers dinners M-F on a prearranged menu, although there is an elaborate "booking in advance" system (actually it isn't that elaborate, but you have to remember by lunch time to have ordered). As a result I have only eaten at Leckhampton once, (Beef curry on rice with papadams (sp?), followed by ice-cream and profiteroles, for those that have any interest in this stuff). Yes, vegetables are quite rare (well none with that meal), with the exception of the humble potato, strange given that in wandering through the market I noticed only a small increase in price for the most part (probably due to transport costs ?) and a fair range.

At the College proper, there are full dining facilities offering breakfast lunch and tea, Sunday through Friday, as the college is quite close to my work, I have had lunch here several times. Hot meals (for breakfast lunch and tea) seem a bit of a tradition, but there is a regular, if small, range of other items apart from roast <whatever> and potato. Compared with the Halls of residence at Monash, the meals are much the same, humm, no a wider choice really. Certainly there is a leaning towards smothering everything in one sauce or another (gravy or otherwise). Some sort of roast is on offer, along with an alternative, sometimes two, (chicken, and Cornish pasties were todays alternatives), and several vegetables either a pea or a bean, or a broad bean, and maybe a carrot or something, and always two sorts of potatoes, either roast or sliced, or mash or whatever. There are a selection of salads generally available (although potato salad features prominently) and various sweets, generally un-sampled (although the chocolate cake and sauce was just fine).

I am not sure on the relative price, but the college heavily subsidises the meals facilities, so I'd imagine they are quite cheap. Certainly cheaper, by half, than a pub meal. One result of the subsidising of meals is that the undergraduates must have a minimum number of meals in college.

There are plenty of other meal choices from pubs to Indian restaurants to the omni-present Pizza Hut and McDonalds (sad really.) However the choice is certainly not as great, nor are the prices as cheap. There are few Chinese, fewer Italian and none of the mixture Melbourne offers (Lebanese, Egyptian, Greek, German, and so on.) Additionally, for someone who really enjoys good vegetarian food, these restaurants are close to (although, not quite) nonexistent. Restaurants with a more cosmopolitan feel are also lacking. Well, now I am starting to sound like the American looking for the Holiday Inn.

It is worth bearing in mind at this point a useful comparison (highly colloquial, but useful none-the-less). Cambridge is roughly the same size as Ballarat, about 100,000 people. While more than a two industry town (farm and University), these are the prevalent two. With respect to this sizing, it is no surprise of the limited range and so on. In comparison, more on my whizz through London in a future letter.

One price difference that has struck me instantly, is chocolate is considerably cheaper and more prevalent here, generally about half-2/3rds Australian prices, a chocaholics heaven (or a dieters nightmare). Also a substantially different range with Terry's (famous for their "chocolate orange"), Cadbury and Nestle featuring prominently.

An item not on the shelf is the biscuit bar (the TimTam or whatever) that are common in Australia. Actually thats another one, I had heard that Australia was the highest per-capita biscuit eating nation in the world, well I could believe it too. The range of biscuits is paltry in comparison and of course the Arnott favourites are not present either. (Alas no Tim Tam or Mint Slice, maybe a good thing considering the huge amount of chocolate elsewhere.)

Sainsbury's (the local GJ Coles equivalent) has a pair of stores in Cambridge, the city store has a fair range, but the second Sainsbury's, the >BIG< Sainsbury's, is warehouse like in its interior.

There are few hardware style stores, although those that are around are called DIY's or DIY often features in the title. A significant number of book shops also abound including two very well stocked ones, four/five floor department store style, (although considering the local population, this is probably very different from the average and hardly surprising). Additionally, there is the usual crush of electronics, music, computer, hair-care, clothing and what-have-you.

Finally two other local institutions worth mentioning, WH Smiths the local newsagent, quite prevalent and Boots, the local pharmacy. Both are so common place, Boots is a substitute for pharmacy/chemist and WHSmith is a common substitute used when meaning a newsagent/stationary store.

Well, where do I work ?

I am a research associate at Cambridge University with the Computer Laboratory. The contract I have been offered is for one year, with an additional year if they like my work (and I like being here). It was made clear to me that, assuming funding was available (ie I got a scholarship) a PhD place would be available, should everything else work out okay.

The Computer Laboratory at Cambridge is the main research group for computer related topics. If I was interested in flight engineering I would be at the Whittle Laboratory, Nuclear Radiation would place me at the Cavendish or Rutherford Laboratories, it appears that no rich/important ex-Cambridge computing people have donated/died.

The Computer Laboratory has about 170 (give or take) academic staff, researchers and research students.

There are eight large research groups, I am involved in the "Systems Research Group". Actually there are no really hard and fast barriers between groups and there is a lot of movement of staff and information between the groups. About the largest thing to stop this movement is that there is a lot of work to be done in some cases and well, people in each group are generally being paid of/for and by that group anyway.

Well the Systems Research Group has lots of interesting systems experience ranging from operating systems to communications networks. In the communications group (about 20), they have some very nifty ATM (hi-speed network architecture, not Auto-Teller Machine) gear and a lot of experience. They seem to put a project bid in for just about anything that moves and commonly have six to ten projects running simultaneously. Funding for the projects is often joint, and includes such groups as ESPRIT (the EC funding body), BT (British Telecom), the university itself, various companies and so on.

It is extremely common for superficially different, but similar projects to receive different grants and funding, as a result there can be a nice amount of over funding too. I was told "oh, your in Systems, well you will never be short of equipment...compared with us in <poor depraved section> who don't have two Commodore-64's to rub together"

I was employed mainly because they were shorthanded on a particular project (and still are, anyone else feel like a trip to sunny Cambridge ?). This project is running a little late (about three months, by most estimates) as a result two new Research Assistants (myself and another) were accepted, good for me I got some interesting work in a different and far-off country, good for them, they got another worker, good for the project, good for everyone.

The work is interesting, actually the work place is very interesting, there are a lot of both new start-up companies (one is a co-partner in the project I am working on), who have their staff as either students or staff of the Computer Laboratories. Two of the bigger players in the particular communications the laboratory specialises in, ATM Ltd and Olivetti are in town as well as several other technology parks and laboratories (Hewlett Packard, (Xerox) EuroParc, DEC) are all present.

Okay well where am I ?

Currently I am in a dungeon, well not really, but I am in a temporary office, there is some new workspace being cleared and myself as well as four others will be taking it over. (A long cry from the solitude, privacy and >space< of my RDT office.)

For the hardware heads: I sit in front of an HP X workstation, all things considered not a bad piece of equipment, although once I move I anticipate sitting in front of a low/middle DEC Alpha, or latest word has it, a highend PC running Linux for now and an Alpha later. There is a real spread of equipment through the laboratories. Frankly there has not been a brand I have not seen in one place or another, although the principle project and laboratory sponsors, DEC and HP have their equipment feature prominently.

Well what do I >DO< ??

My current little project, apart from playing catchup by reading lots, is to port or write new tools for a new micro-kernel developed at the lab. Didn't make sense to most ? okay bare with me...

Micro-kernel's are a name, they mean small "kernels" and represents a philosophy as much as anything else. Whats a kernel ? well a kernel is the basic computer program lying between the hardware (the computer, the bits you can touch) and the software (things that do what you want to do.)

Well this kernel (program) is for ATM (communications) switches, it is designed to be disgustingly fast and small. (Yes it is all crafted in Assembler, Peter Atkinson would love it.) Additionally this kernel is designed to be put into the "set-top boxes" (Set-top box is the thing that goes on top of your TV (TV-set, hence the name set-top) when you are connected to cable television services or whatever. In the telecom-ad that was running when I left its the thing "Nicko" is controlling with a remote control and it does the banking and plays games and so on.)

My job is to give this kernel functionality by writing extra programs for it. The Laboratory has had a previous kernel which did all these things, but it is quite large and slow and non-standard in the way it worked. The idea was to create and continue to build something which matches, and maybe sets standards for this sort of work.

For the Tech-heads: one of the first jobs I have is to create a communications stack, ala Berkeley sockets (although NOT Berkeley sockets) for the micro-kernel.

Okay so the short answer is I am programming.

At work there are two rituals, firstly morning and afternoon tea, while not everyone goes, if you don't go, you can miss out on vital information. The other is the pub after work on Friday's, well these seem as common a place for discussing new work, old work and anything else that pops into people's heads, so it is a ritual too.

What else do I do ??

Well outside of work I have seen a few films, gone swimming in a lovely pool (indoor of course) been to a few pubs and been to London for a whizz visit.

Apart from that I have been "wandering around town", all extremly pretty, but more on that in later letters.

Other:

The most unusual adjustment I have had to make is the 4pm sundown.

The weather is cold, without a doubt, particularly once the sun is down, but it is considerably more pleasant than I was lead to believe. (I think it sits around 8degC most of the day, and please don't tell me how wonderful (or revolting) the 35-40 degC is, thank you.

I tend to wear trousers (alas no shorts, well not at the moment), but with a regular (short-sleeved) shirt most of the time indoors, and pop my coat on over the top when I am outside.

Best Wishes to all,
Andrew.

(and in the next episode: London, electricity and the_saga_of_the_luggage)