

LASAR

Residential

Learning about science and religion

We all arrived at the University of Reading by 3.30pm on the Sunday afternoon and, after being shown to our rooms, we were given a tour of our home for the week: an old manor type building, with a square courtyard.

As it's university accommodation it's simply furnished: a bed and a desk with a lamp, a wardrobe in the corner and a sink against the wall, but the rooms are nice enough.

We head towards the common room, and sit down in the chairs arranged there, where we are introduced to the leader of the LASAR project, Dr Berry Billingsley, a small woman with a doctorate in robotics. She explained that over the next five days or so, the seven of us would learn about science and the philosophy pertaining to it, side by side. She explained to us the different mindsets some people had when viewing such topics as genetics, behaviour or the soul, the main ones being reductive (the belief that everything can be boiled down into one discipline, like behaviour can be solely explained by biology) and non-reductive (the belief that you need two or more ways of looking at something in order to truly explain it). She was very nice and gave us a few get-to-know-you exercises, before the lectures and activities began.

For the sake of brevity, I won't describe every single one of the activities we did, but I will describe some of my favourites.

On one of the evenings, we played a game called Pandemic with a doctor of genetics. In it, all the players work together to eradicate four diseases from the face of the world. The board is various circles representing cities, all joined together by white lines, and most of the cities had little blocks on them to signify the diseases. By the end of the game, when all of the cards had ran out, you needed to have cured and eradicated all the diseases, which, trust me, is nigh on impossible. Shortly after that, we went outside to look at the stars with telescopes, which was a bit disappointing, as the sky was cloudy, but we got to see the International Space Station, which was amazing!

Another of my favourite parts was the day based on genetics. We did two practical experiments one in which

we extracted DNA from a strawberry (or in my case, a kiwi) and then in the second experiment, we cloned a cauliflower, which ended (in my case at least) with some mould growing, meaning I hadn't been as meticulous as I should have been! That was a lot of fun, because we didn't often get the opportunity to do practicals and the experiment was very hands on, involving Bunsen burners, agar jelly, and lots and lots of disinfectant.

My final favourite was the day dedicated to archaeology. My only experience of archaeology to date was through Indiana Jones and Jurassic Park, so it was good to get a peek into that world. We had approximately a two or three hour session with a lecturer who taught us how to recognise trauma in bones. This included us looking at skulls, leg bones, fibulas and metacarpals and the like, and having to identify where the trauma was. Most of the damage to the bones was due to ageing, and done after death, so we had to ignore large holes in the side of the skulls and focus on a small indentation just above it. It was incredibly interesting, and I found out that once you've reached the age of 45, it is nigh on impossible to tell how old you are by your skeleton. It was a lot of fun, and required a bit more brain power than most of the other activities.

The other topics included weather forecasting, astronomy, evolution, and science and religion, not to mention, everyone else's favourite session: building a robot. We spent a good three hours programming a computer chip, and constructing a little robot for it to control. It all sounds very exciting, but eventually, I ended up with a little rover that moved forward, crashed into something, reversed, turned a bit, then continued the cycle. Everyone had immense fun making them, and even gave them pet names, as some of the robots turned around in endless circles.

All in all, it was a superb experience, where I learnt a lot, had a lot of fun, and made new friends. I hope to go back next year if I can, and I hope even more people can attend next time.