

Recognition of Distinction in Global Health

University of Alabama at Birmingham Heersink School of Medicine

Research Elective: Cardiff

Date of Training: 6/9-8/1

Student: Ailsa Saverse

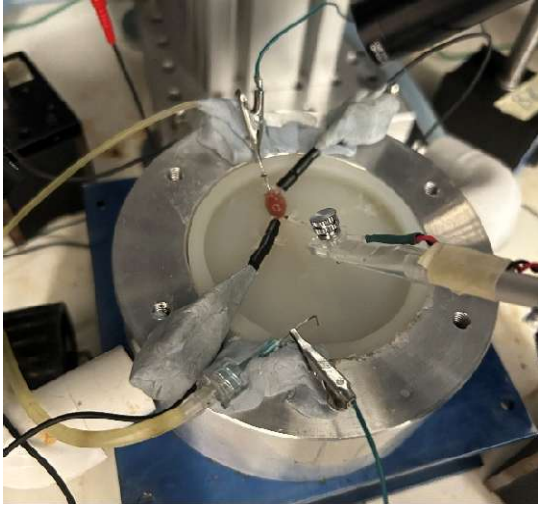
Date of Reflection: 9/5/2025

This summer I had the opportunity to complete a research project in Cardiff, Wales. I am no stranger to the UK. I studied in Glasgow, Scotland in 2020 and 2021, so I was so excited to go back. I was also going into this under better circumstances. My last academic visit to the UK began in the heart of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I was travelling alone to a country I had never visited before. Despite never going to Wales before this trip, I felt comparatively far more prepared. Perhaps the most stressful part of the planning for this summer occurred around 2 weeks prior to my departure when I received word that my AirBnB had fallen through. After several late nights Googling and emailing what felt like every short-term rental option in Cardiff, I secured a flat! This would not be the total end of that storyline, however. Upon arriving to Cardiff, I was initially really impressed with my flat as my room was clean and exactly what I would need for a short stay. The kitchen, however, left little to be desired. Due to my last-minute accommodation changes, I was placed in a flat where several other students had been living for the whole academic year. Suffice to say that our cleanliness standards were quite different. In total, I probably ended up seeing those roommates only a handful of very quick, sub-1-minute run-ins in the kitchen the entire summer. Thankfully though, I would find companions elsewhere.



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When I first arrived in my lab, I was started on analyzing older data which ended up being incorporated into my own as controls. This was a headfirst dive into mouse ECGs and learning new computer programs to analyze said data. I worked on this for around one week while the PhD student was finishing up some of her own experiments. There was only one set up as all of the experiments had to be run in a room which was able to be made completely dark for optical mapping and which was Schedule 1 approved for specific euthanasia standards. As such, only one person could run a mouse experiment at a time. The next week was when I would begin. My PI euthanized the mice and then

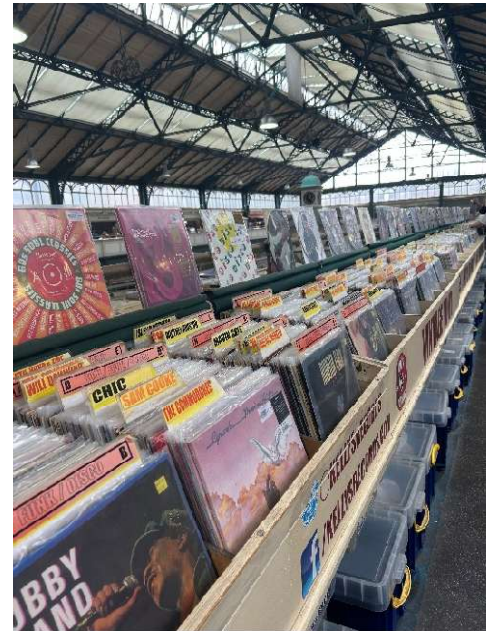


excised and cannulated the hearts. I was then in charge of keeping them on Langendorff perfusion and inducing all of our tested variables. In all, it took around 3 hours per mouse for this first phase of experimentation. Later, we would add another component, optical mapping, which would lengthen the procedure by an additional 1-2 hours per mouse. In between experiments, I was learning the basics of MATLAB as well as a few other programs used specifically for the interpretation of optical mapping data. To say I gained a lot of new skills over the summer is an understatement. Although the lab protocols were long, I was generally able to pick them up fairly quickly due to my previous wet lab

experience. The computer aspect was much more difficult for me, however.

One of my favorite parts of the summer though, was the people I met. My lab shared space with four others on the 4th floor of the bioscience building. It was here that I met Gemma, the PhD student in my own lab, as well as Krishna and Phoebe, graduate students of a neighboring lab.

These three women, and several other members of the labs, truly took me under their wing. They made sure I knew what to do in Cardiff, invited me rock climbing, and ensured I always had Friday night plans. They also commiserated with me when experiments failed, helped with computer struggles, and gave advice when I needed it. I have known since doing my master's that I am not destined to be a researcher, and I do not have the brain for it despite how interesting I do find it. These women were always there to remind me that I am not supposed to have the brain of a researcher. I am supposed to have one of a doctor, and according to them, I do. I loved getting to put my two cents in on things like the clinical side of what lung fibrosis really



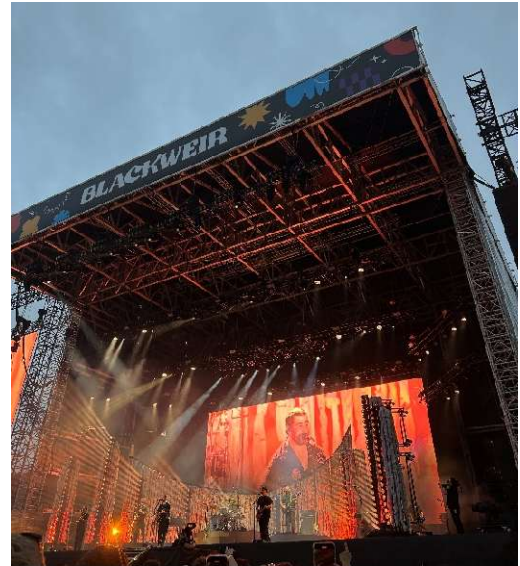
presents as, which was the topic of Krishna and Phoebe's research. I also loved getting to confirm or dispel rumors about the US when we sat around the lunch table. Without those three, I think I would have had a much harder summer.

Another very fun aspect of my summer was my weekends, which I decided to take full advantage of. I spent the first weekend exploring the city. Cardiff's nickname is the City of Arcades, which are covered alleys full of independent shops. Cardiff is also home to a castle, a large

indoor market, and so much more. The next weekend I met up in Bath with my fellow UAB students, Shreya and Sumedha. We explored the ancient Roman baths, took a walking tour around the city, and marveled at Bath Abbey. The next weekend was a personal highlight when two of my favorite musical artists came into town, Noah Kahan and Djo. I made some quick friends at that concert as I had gone alone, and we managed to get free passes for the VIP area, bringing us much closer to the stage, which was a truly unforgettable experience.



Next, I went to Bristol to see Wallace and Gromit statues, find hidden Banksy art, and ride the ferry along the river. This was an especially packed



weekend as the very next day I travelled to Oxford where I again met up with Shreya and Sumedha who showed me around the different colleges of the university, and I got to live out some Harry Potter dreams. The next weekend I travelled to a new favorite city, Copenhagen. I went to the world-renowned theme park, Tivoli Gardens where I rode rides in the rain and attended a free-with-admission Train concert. I once again quickly made

friends with some other visiting Americans as we all laughed together about the pre-show Kahoot we attempted to contribute to despite every question being in Danish. I spent that weekend wandering around the brightly colored Nyhavn, eating delicious pastries, and boating around the canals. I was lucky the next weekend as my mom came to town! We met up in London and enjoyed a weekend on the West End,



seeing Six and The Great Gatsby starring Corbin Bleu as Nick Carroway. This was particularly exciting for me as Corbin



Bleu played Chad Danforth in the High School Musical series, a set of movies that defined my childhood. Finally, I spent my last free weekend in Dublin where I stayed at Trinity College and wondered at the National Gallery, Book of Kells, and Long Room. I grew up Irish dancing, so finally being able to visit Ireland, even if only for a quick 36-hour trip, was a big tick on my bucket list.

Between all these weekends, I also snuck in a few fun experiences in Cardiff itself. I went to see the Book of Mormon, visited the beach and ate fish and chips in nearby Barry, and attended an impromptu concert of Sebastian Schub who had opened for Noah Kahan just a few weeks earlier.

Going to Cardiff was a great opportunity for so many reasons.



Primarily, I got to immerse myself in a globally connected lab, dive deeply into a niche topic, and be at the forefront of potential progress. I think particularly for me, I enjoyed getting to learn so much about something so small. In medical school, we have to learn such a breadth of information, so it was nice to change pace like that for several weeks. I did miss medical school though while abroad. I missed getting to see the clinical aspect and interacting with patients. This summer truly acted as a great way to remind me of the importance of research and a need for physicians to stay involved in it, but it was also a great reminder that I made the right choice going to medical school after my master's and not trying to pursue a PhD, something that I truly do not think I would be well suited to. Beyond this, I also got to reignite my love of travel this summer. Being in medical school it is so hard to get away even for a weekend. In the UK, however, trains and cheap Ryanair flights make spontaneous trips possible. I am very grateful for the experience I had, and I cannot wait to help next year's class plan their own summer experiences.

