

And so today, my world, it smiles
Your hand in mine, we walk the miles
-Led Zeppelin, *Thank You*

Chapter 2: Mad Hatters & Englishmen

Not In Knightsbridge Any More

We made our grand entrance into London and immediately rung up my mother's cousin Jennifer. She and her Italian husband Matteo, live in the very posh Knightsbridge section of London. Jennifer and Mateo were extremely gracious and put us up in their basement flat on one of the loveliest side streets in all of London. The flat itself was spartan; just a fold out bed and a narrow hallway leading to a tiny bathroom. But given the location, and the fact that hostel beds were going for around 15 Quid apiece, we were pretty damn excited about it. When these buildings were built a few hundred years ago, the basement flat was where the dude whose job it was to shovel coal into the furnace all day long lived. Very Dickens. At that time, one family would own all four floors. But the economics of living in a city like London has divided the floors into separate residences. Jennifer and Matteo live in the tiny fourth floor flat but also own the furnace flat and used it as their art studio and guest room. The night we arrived was Lori's first night in a foreign country besides Canada. We were both charged with excitement to be starting this phase of our travels with still so much more stretched out ahead of us. I remember squeezing into the tiny lift that serviced the building. We were nose to nose as we slowly creaked our way up and up the the cables to the 4th floor, giddy with feelings of "look where we are now!" When we reached the top, the brass accordion doors were opened manually by Jennifer, releasing us right into their flat, rather than into a lobby area. All wonderfully strange.

Jennifer moved to London in the 1970's after a her marriage ended to get a fresh start. She founded a non-profit arts organization, designed to foster artistic collaboration around the world. Matteo is an old time socialist from Naples, who came to England to practice medicine. We had spent weeks living in the little studio before I noticed one day that the tools hanging on the wall had been placed rather subtly as a hammer and sickle, in the same positions as the Communist symbol on the Soviet flag. Matteo was a gifted artist. While it was only a hobby for him, and he was quite modest about it he put together stunning collages. I thought they were wonderful. They struck me as perfect blends of Warhol and Picasso with the colors of Dali. I tried to

buy one but he shrugged it off saying they weren't worth anything. I wanted to then say "well can I just have one then?"

While in London, we visited the Tower of London. It's was pricey and a little nauseating from a tourist swarm standpoint, but it's a historically rich and fascinating place. Nearby is the striking Tower Bridge on the Thames. It's not London Bridge even though tourists call it that. Apparently, the original London Bridge was dismantled some time ago and sold to someone in Arizona. Shipping must have been a bitch on that. A short walk away is the imposing St. Paul's Cathedral, built by the renowned Sir Christopher Wren. During the the Second World War, the German Luftwaffe, while they still enjoyed total air superiority, mercilessly bombed London. They attempted to destroy support for the war by directly targeting civilians in one of the first major examples of that in modern warfare history. It became known as the London Blitz. While much of London went up in flames, and down in rubble, bombs either missed St. Paul's or in a few cases simply bounced off the dome. This "miracle" turned it into an inspiring symbol of British resolve and resistance that remains to this day.

We strolled through the lush green meadows and ponds of Hyde Park, which was both a private hunting ground for Henry the VIII and the sight of the Rolling Stones free concert in memory of Brian Jones in 1969. That is something I love about Europe. How the same patch of ground can play host to so many centuries of well documented and totally incongruous events.

We saw the British Museum, full of ancient treasures from Greece and Egypt. It's wonderful that these relics are preserved so beautifully, but it also reveals what scoundrels the early British archeologists were in their wanton acquisition of ancient loot. They got some of the very best stuff, that's for sure. Another interesting thing in the British Museum is their collection of old manuscripts and written works. They have everything from early Bibles to early Beatles songs. The Bibles tell an interesting story. Some of the earliest know bibles portray Christians as seeking a very close personal relationship with God. Later editions such as The King James Bible conspicuously left those passages out and replaced them with entreaties to seek god *through* the Church, not directly. Do I suspect a profit motive here? It would come back to bite them later during the reformation.

On to the National Gallery, one of the world's premier painting collections. We also paid visits to Parliament and Westminster Abbey. My favorite part of Westminster Abbey is strolling around looking for famous sons who are entombed beneath the hallowed stones. Every few feet you exclaim "Wow, I

didn't know he was buried here." They have to be buried somewhere I suppose, but there are so many famous ones within the Abbey. It's a who's who of deceased British poets and politicians.

Plays and Musicals are relatively economical in London as well as being some of the best in the world. You can see shows on London's West End for 5 Pounds that would cost you 45 Pounds to see on Broadway. We took in *Les Miserables* and *Miss Saigon*, both of which were pretty spectacular. Being *Deadheads*, we also managed to see the Grateful Dead at Wembley on their European tour. I had assumed that the Dead would draw a largely European audience to their shows and only a few die-hard Dead Heads from the States, who could afford the trip. Apparently, they can all afford the trip, because the show was sold out and I couldn't positively identify a single European. We could have just as easily been in Chicago as London. I don't know why they even bothered to do a tour over there, unless it was just to give the faithful a change of scenery. I remember one energetic guy on the Tube wearing a beret and sporting a bottle of French wine. The Paris show had been the night before.

The Dollar was very weak against the Pound so we couldn't languish in pubs quite as much as we would have liked, but we did manage a few. I love English pubs. If American bars were as warm and fun to drink in as pubs are, I would waste considerably more time in them. Right from the start, the colorful signs drew me in. I love the playful names and rich artwork. They just make you think; "we've got to have a pint in there." Some of the ones we visited: The Polar Bear, The Swag & Tail, The Slug & Lettuce, The Clarence and The Fox & Hounds.

Our hosts, Jennifer & Matteo, had us upstairs for several superb Italian meals, courtesy of Matteo, during our visit. After dinner one night, out came the Grappa, an Italian liqueur, famous for its gasoline like intensity. I have always had an asbestos mouth when it came to liquor. There isn't much I can't get down and enjoy. Several fairly lethal, homemade Grappas made the rounds and I was feeling better every minute. Then Matteo pulled out his Grandmother's homemade, walnut liqueur. Matteo's grandmother is one hundred-years-old and has never set foot outside Naples, so you can bet that she knows a thing or two about homemade liqueur. This stuff was simply unbelievable. It made Grappa taste like lemonade. One sip and the flames ripped through my brain and out my ears. I was pretty sure I was going to go blind a few seconds later. But I wanted more.

We ended a wonderful night by looking through Jennifer's collection of antique cameras, which was strangely fitting somehow. I'm just not sure why exactly. But after the Grappa, I suppose mud wrestling would have seemed fitting.

Druids, Guy Fawkes, & Romans

After several days of tooling around London, we planned to rent a car and set off into the storied English countryside. England was the one place on the whole trip that we had decided to splurge on a car. It is more difficult to see the sights in England by train than it is in the rest of Europe. And a rail pass was actually more expensive than the car. But, the company we had booked from in the States fell through on us at the last minute, leaving us stranded at Heathrow Airport without a car or a plan. We checked the other agencies and they were all prohibitively expensive. Just as we were nearing despair, I saw a passenger pick-up van go by with a rental agency name on it that I hadn't seen inside the airport. I called them from a pay phone and they had a car we could afford.

It was extremely comical striking out in a sub-compact rental car, all hunched up, sitting on the right side of the car, shifting with my left hand, and driving on the left side of the road. It was an enormously unnatural feeling. I felt like I was in a bumper car at the fair. But off we went anyway, me concentrating like mad, Lori laughing hysterically and trying to decipher the map.

The roundabouts were lots of fun. In those days, unless you had driven in parts of New England or in England, you had probably never seen one of these before. They are traffic circles in lieu of traffic lights. Everybody just merges into the circle and drives around until they come to their road. Near London, they can be massive with 6 or 7 different exits off the wheel. It is infinitely more fun, exciting and expedient than a traffic light. Sometimes we had to make two or three circuits before we could decide which road we wanted and then manage to get over to it.

We set off straight away for Stonehenge, possibly the world's most famous ancient monument. Apparently, there is a movement in England to relocate the road farther from the monument and bring tourists into the area by electric train. The feeling is that the cosmic nature of the site is being seriously degraded by the Disneyland throngs around it each summer. We decided not to pay the somewhat pricey entrance fee to stand a bit nearer to it. So we snapped a few pictures from the roadway, thought about Druids for a minute, and set off again. There are actually lots of mysterious Druid

structures in this part of England besides Stonehenge, including many more stone circles. Most of these are virtually unknown to tourists. At Avenbury, you can walk right through the stones. The circle is enormous too, with a circumference of around a mile. There are smaller ones too. We would see them on our Atlas and then hunt around on the back roads for them, stopping for farmers to herd cattle or sheep across the road. When we finally found the stones, it would often be just us alone with a stone circle, a few sheep, the cosmos, and the Druids. It felt almost spooky at times.

Another ancient mystery we passed was a huge earthen mound that was constructed around 4500 years ago. They estimate that it required four-million hours to build. Four million! That's a lot of work! Archeologists still have no idea what its purpose or function was but I guess it must have been pretty important at the time.

The driving was absolutely first rate by my estimation. Winding, narrow little roads lined with stone fences and green hedgerows. The roads wind through pastures and dales and always lead to little English hamlets with one pub, one red phone box and about a dozen stone farm houses. It was like Mr. Toad's Wild Ride in *Wind in the Willows*. It's wonderful when life's little fantasies turn out to still be intact.

We usually stayed at youth hostels at night. It was off season, so we were often able to get a "family" room all to ourselves for the same price as two dorm beds. One night, when we couldn't find a youth hostel, we splurged for a Bed & Breakfast. Our timing was good because it turned out to be Guy Fawkes night. Guy Fawkes tried, unsuccessfully, to dynamite the English Parliament building a few hundred years ago. Now this infamous occasion is observed with backyard bonfires and fireworks for some reason. It wasn't clear to me whether this was because he failed or because they admired his pluck for trying. Maybe both? Our hosts invited us to attend their bonfire. There was a beautiful autumn sunset that lit up the twilight in a deep red and orange. We stood around a roaring blaze in the cool, damp, air with our hosts on their one-hundred acres of farmland. They had the Scottish caps, Wellies, and what we would call knickers on but they would call something else since knickers are women's underwear. They had thick country accents and the overall scene couldn't have been any more English if Winston Churchill dropped by for a pint. They fed us porter and beef burgers while we jointly railed against the Thatcher Tories and the Reagan Revolution. Thatcher was to lose her job a short 2 weeks later after 11-years in office with a sudden loss of party support. The next morning, Madge, our farm wife

hostess, fed us coffee, corn flakes, fried eggs, toast, sausage, fried mushrooms, bacon and marmalade for breakfast. Pure Bliss.

Another incredible experience was at Warwick Castle, which is one of England's most romantic, storybook looking castles. We wandered all over the grounds with me snapping photographs at a frenzied pace because I couldn't believe such a place was real. It has a very real and bone chilling dungeon however. It is impossible, and I do mean impossible, to even glimpse at the thoughts of a man who found himself in a 12th-century dungeon. How can you even begin to imagine the state of mind of someone forced into a pit no bigger than a gunny sack and left to starve to death, deep in a lightless dungeon. All you can do is shiver a little.

An hour West of London by train, or a day by horse, is the the town of Bath. It is a spectacular place. Much of the architecture from the Georgian period, two hundred years ago, is still intact and lends Bath a distinctly regal air. It has been a resort destination for about two millennia (almost as long as Orlando, Florida I think). It has a great Roman legacy. The Romans built the original baths over the natural hot springs and it became the fashionable getaway from the bustling, muddy and probably smelly London (or Londinium) of Roman times. Throughout the next two thousand years, the wealthy Anglo Saxons and English continued to journey to Bath to soak in the mineral springs and adorn the city with art and architecture. Cruder baths were constructed over top of the Roman Baths in the middle ages and it was less than one hundred years ago that the original Roman Baths were discovered. The tour of the recently excavated Roman facility was fascinating. The incredible structures illustrate how technically and socially advanced Roman society became. Their engineering know-how and obvious economic power was sufficient to create a society not unlike that of present day industrialized countries, where leisure is a studied art form. The Romans developed an elaborate system of pools that ranged from the scalding hot to the freezing cold. They had hot and cold running water, on demand, just as we do today. Roman's took bathing very seriously. Even in the remotest military outpost, there was likely to be baths. They bathed au natural with both sexes together, thinking nothing of it, or maybe thinking very much of it.

Meanwhile, back at the youth hostel, my wife and I had to sleep in separate unisex rooms. Why are we going backwards?

[In and Around the Lakes, Mountains Come Out of the Sky](#)

The next stop was the ethereal, mountainous Lakes District. This is Wordsworth country. We absolutely loved it. We drove around all day, from lake to lake, eating peanut butter & jelly sandwiches and biscuits (chocolate cookies). Road A592 made my short list for breathtaking drives around the world. At one point the gradient was so steep you could couldn't see the road over the hood of our tiny Ford Escort. On the side of the road a sign warned "Caution Steep Grade." 25 yards further on, another said "You have been Warned!"

On another road the next morning, perched on top of the foggy, precipitous Hard Knot Pass, we came upon an old Roman fort. Given the utter lack of tourist hallmarks such as gates, signs, entrance fees and... well... tourists, we felt as though we were discovering this place ourselves. It was so eerie to wander through an ancient Roman outpost in the fog, situated at what was then, the end of the known world, and imagine what life must have been like for them. This would definitely have been considered to be a dreadful assignment for a Roman soldier. The ideal assignment was to be pushing a feather pen in the Roman Forum. The assignment got progressively less desirable the further you were stationed from that point. This was as far as you could go and the weather definitely wouldn't have agreed with the typical Latin constitution. But even in this dinky little stone fort in middle of nowhere, the soldiers had their baths. These people were civilized.

Our memories of the Lakes District from that November are of beauty and solitude. It felt as though we were the only people there much of the time, as we wound in and around the lakes with names like Derwent Water and Ullswater. But according to a 1990 edition of National Geographic, some twelve million visitors flood the small area each summer, badly stretching its capacity to deliver Wordsworth's "blended holiness of earth and sky" to each one. I guess the message is travel off season if you can.

Just a little ways North of the Lakes District is Hadrian's wall. This massive structure at one time spanned the width of England and was fortified with soldiers and forts at every mile along its entirety. It was built by the Emperor Hadrian to mark the Northern terminus of the Roman Empire, but, more pragmatically, to keep the pesky Scots out of the empire who had proven to be particularly unwilling to be conquered.

It's hard for people today to fully appreciate the magnitude of the accomplishment that was the Roman Empire. They conquered, controlled and governed an area of land that stretched from Africa to England and from Asia to the Atlantic. And, they did it 2000 years ago, without the aid of

motorized vehicles or electronic communications, not to mention rubber tires or freeze dried food. An extraordinary feat. Yet in spite of their ability to conquer and hold the then-known world, Hadrian felt it necessary to stop short of conquering the Northern half of this relatively small island, and to construct this massive edifice to provide a demarcation of the empire's Northernmost boundary. Those Scots must have been something.