

England trip 2008

There is a quote from "84 Charing Cross Road" in which Helene Hanff, the author, says that if she goes to England, she would look for the England of English literature and she is told "It's there". I thought of that quote many times on this holiday.

Oliver Twist

On our second night, we met my cousin near Tower Bridge and he walked us to the flat he and his wife share, near to the bridge. Their building is called "Jacob's Island" because it is where "Oliver Twist" was set. Their terrace looks out onto the River Thames and there were ducks paddling in the pond surrounding their building. I found it ironic that the setting of a story of a boy who lived in abject poverty should now be the site of upscale homes.

More family members joined us and we all went to dinner at Café Rouge on the other side of the Thames. It was a beautiful, warm night and we stopped along the way to take photos under Tower Bridge. Just before reaching our restaurant we came to a colourful, flower-filled spot shadowed by the "Dicken's Inn". It looked like an oasis.

We enjoyed catching up with each other, it has been a year since we were all together for my cousin's wedding. We were remembering all the great food we had in France and Keeb asked my cousin's French wife how she handles eating British food, she replied serenely "I eat in French restaurants".

84 Charing Cross Road

We made a few trips to browse the antique bookstores that line Charing Cross Road. There's always a great feeling of anticipation when you climb down the stairs to the basement and the scent of old books sneaks up on you. We went to 84 Charing Cross Road and Keeb took a photo of me under the brass plate that marks the site of that famous bookshop "Mark and Co." This place is special to us both. I had read (and loved) the book about the letters of Helene Hanff and Frank Doel many years ago. Then, in the early 1990s I found the movie based on the book and rented it so Keeb was introduced to the story as well. Here's where it gets interesting. Now, at the time we watched that movie we had no access to online book buying. The day after watching this movie about an avid booklover who bought books for 20 years from a bookstore in England, an invitation to join "The Good Book Club" came to us in the mail.

We immediately jumped at the opportunity to buy books from this British catalogue. For years we'd select books based on the club's reviews and I would troop down to the post office to buy the sterling money orders required to pay for the books. Eventually, Amazon.com put paid to all that and we never found out why that invitation was sent to us. But I remember fondly those times, and how precious those books were, in part because they took so long to arrive by regular airmail.

While we were on our Charing Cross Road rambles, we walked along Cecil Court and I told Keeb I felt as though I had stepped into Diagon Alley. I know that sounds a bit silly but J. K. Rowling did place the gateway to Diagon Alley, The Leaky Cauldren, on Charing Cross Road so you never know about what else in the area inspired her descriptions. Anyway, this little street had that bygone era feel and we browsed antiquarian book, music, print and map shops.

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Persuasion and Northanger Abbey

After a couple of days in London we visited Bath (120 miles by train west of London) where we toured the Roman Baths. The tour guide was a bit sleazy but the Great Bath was impressive. I had visited this place more than twenty years ago with Tam and Helen but this was Keeb's first time.

Right next to the Baths was the Pump Room that was featured in "Northanger Abbey". In addition we did a city bus tour and saw the gravel walk mentioned in "Persuasion" as the place where Captain Wentworth proposed to Anne. The walk is in a beautiful green setting with an exclusive hotel overlooking it. The guide was quick to say Johnny Depp stays there when he is in Bath. The truth is that hotel was so obscured by trees it's hard to make out much about the building.

Keeb was kind enough to go to the Jane Austen Centre with me. We had crumpets for tea at the centre: a first for us both. The centre had a really impressive gift shop and I did some shopping there.

We also went on a comedy walking tour called Bizarre Bath led by a magician. It was quite entertaining. The guide made use of stuffed white rabbits in the act which included one escaping from a bag in which it was chained and thrown into the River Avon. As the bag descended into the water and bubbles broke on the surface, the guide said, "Sorry about that, it had beans today".

Bath is the only city to be named a World Heritage site and with good reason. The original buildings are well preserved and new ones complement those that have stood for centuries. I really enjoyed walking around the city and taking in the Georgian buildings, the Parade Garden, The Circus and the picturesque Pulteney Bridge across which we walked each day.

Harry Potter

The day we checked out of our hotel in Bath, my friends Jim and Mrs. Woodcock picked us up to spend that day with them. They were such wonderful guides and drove us to Bradford on Avon where we walked along streets with antique churches brightened by the most vivid flowers spilling over baskets. The sky was bright blue and the flowers' yellows, purples and magentas stood out so brilliantly against it. It was very bittersweet as we all wished Pauline, Jim's late wife and my childhood friend, could have been with us.

We also visited the quaint village of Lacock which was full of winding roads and medieval houses. Everywhere we looked there was the feel of walking around in the past. Jim told us that scenes from the first "Harry Potter" film were shot in the Lacock Abbey, which was an impressive building complete with turrets. We had tea together at the village tea shop. Jim told us Pauline used to have tea at that shop when she went cycling with her ladies club. We also walked along the River Avon together and house boats continuously passed us with people on holiday. The backs of the boats sported very colourful paintings and made me think of gypsy caravans.

Shows

We saw a play called "Fat Pig", which despite its harsh title was thought-provoking and poignant. The all British cast spoke with American accents. The actress playing the Rubenesque love interest was superb.

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Food

We ate at a brilliant restaurant in Bath called "No. 5". After dinner we did the Bizarre Bath walking tour then we returned to the restaurant for dessert and it did not disappoint. Keeb thinks he has had the best crème brûlée ever. This restaurant is one of the businesses that line the Pulteney Bridge and is in a beautiful setting.

One of the Indian restaurants we tried in Central London was interesting - when the food arrived, instead of the waiter saying "enjoy" or "bon appetite" he said (and I am not making this up) "eat your food" in the tone a parent speaking to a troublesome child.

We tried a few Italian restaurants and they all had good food and good service.

We had dinner at "Wagamama" with Francis and Russell. The person taking our order wrote numerical codes on our placemats when each of us ordered and Keeb suggested we add random numbers and see if their heads would explode trying to sort it out. As you can see it was dignity all the way.

Transport

Well, it would not be a Jo and Keeb holiday if all the transport went smoothly. Our outgoing flight was delayed by an unruly passenger who was eventually escorted off the plane by the Piarco Airport security. The purser on the flight first went to him and asked him to promise to behave himself and he got more annoyed. I suspect that they are trained to make the passenger more incensed so they have a legitimate reason to throw them off and let the next flight crew deal with them.

The Paddington train station (where we took our train to Bath) has a bizarre custom of flashing the platform up with three minutes to get onto the train. Since there are dozens of platforms it was really stressful. Especially as Keeb was being a good citizen and looking for a bin in which to drop his rubbish before boarding. We ran onto the train. I think I'll seriously consider first class tickets next time as it was a *very* long train and it felt like the first half were all first-class carriages.