

England 1986

featuring White Light on the way to Stonehenge

I took my first visit to England in June of 1986, when I spent my 2nd full summer in Europe, thanks to my expatriate brother Grant, who lived in Northern Germany as a classical guitarist at the time. He afforded me a central home base, providing access to surrounding areas of Europe! — together and alone. For now I am focusing on my solo trip to Britain, as a lifelong anglophile, I was really looking forward to this.

LONG COACH RIDE

The journey there began with planning the least expensive travel price, turning out to be a round trip bus ride to the Belgium - England ferry, continuing to London, then returning after one week. A long ride — much longer than the plane trip from the states, but I had to conserve the limited amount of travellers cheques moolah that I had to stretch out to September.

Got the bus from Herford, Germany around noon, that took several hours with pick up stops along the way to Zeebrugge, Belgium where the bus got on the ferry across the English channel to Dover. The weather was hot for the slow bus ride, with delayed stops at different towns on the way. More delays waiting for the ferry, not ready until around midnight.

THE ENGLISH CHANNEL

The ferry ride was a fascinating mix of an all night casino party for almost everyone on board, after getting off of the bus to roam

the decks of this enormous ferry, featuring duty free goods for sale, gambling, food and drinks, which was fascinating and amusing to me. I got a good British ale while wandering around the party. The more memorable part of this ride was when I climbed the stairs to the top, open deck. The dark skies above the channel allowed for less light pollution for stargazing! I ended up staying there for hours, watching the spring constellations set while summer stars rise. The slow throbbing ferry cutting across these historic waters, I fortunately had my nordic sweater, as I experienced the gradually growing light of sunrise, showing the distant and now visibly growing into view — the famed white cliffs of Dover.

I was having a remarkable night as the stars slowly fade into the glow of sunrise, watching the chalk cliffs grow clearer and larger with the boat approaching. I was chuffed!

Docking at sunrise after about a six hour ferry ride felt refreshing even after having no sleep. I was too invigorated by this long awaited pilgrimage!

The first interaction I had on the shores of Old Blighty was with the customs/border inspector who was like an archetypical British officials character from almost a Monty Python skit or a Doctor Who melodrama. As he gives me the suspicious eye, moustachioed, uniformed, in a brusque voice drilling me with "*Are you leaving after a week? You're not planning on working here, are you? Have you enough money?*" his manner amused, like a caricature. I passed his drill and get back on the bus.

LONDON

Daylight now and now the lack of sleep caught up with me. I napped on the remaining few hours on the bus getting some limited spots of shut eye. Opening my eyes to catch glimpses of rolling green pastoral English countryside. Until getting more urban when entering surrounding London, then seeing familiar landmarks appear along the Thames.

Arrival! Dropped at one of the central train stations (its name escapes me), where I seek a travel bureau to help point me to decent, affordable accommodations. The window clerk there informed that being a busy peak season, that the hostels were already all full across London. Unfortunately, the listed available hotels were all budget breakers for this college boy.

The day was young, and I really wanted to explore London for a few days. Determined, I was directed to a few more travel offices in the busiest areas in town. I decided to take the tube. On the way I passed a young woman with a ladder and tools out front of a small art gallery in an interesting old building. She catches me walking by and nicely invites me to her installation opening this evening. How sweet! She must have sensed my art student vibe. I say yes, thanks! If I can find a room in town. She wishes me luck and hope to meet later.

At the station, grabbing a cup of the weakest cup of coffee this side of a Minnesota Perkins. [I was now spoiled by continental European java - dark and strong.]

Another amusing English stereotype emerged from the subway car ; flocks of businessmen on their way to work, dressed nearly

identically to each other, conservative suits and hair, several wearing actual bowler hats! Rushing off the platform all tick-tock fast. I stood by bemused by this distinctive cultural spectacle, after moving on to a more effective caffeine source : black English tea.

Ending up at the wrong station, I decided to hail a cab. A classic London black cab, driving me down in central town, passing big Ben and near Trafalgar Square — I loved it. Cool cab driver too.

On the busy Street, I ask a corner newspaper salesman for directions to the nearby Street I was seeking. The old guys response was in the most illegible sounding cockney accent I have ever heard. In other words, I simply had never been exposed to it before, other than probable fake cockney heard in movies. I heard something like *"oy, tur odderye, bushott cray dair, ovvyhugo"*

[*huh?*]

I thank him and wing it. Going in the general direction of the accommodation centre I'd been advised to visit. The weather was getting hot in kind of a heat wave for the commonly cool grey city. The day was starting to frazzle as I finally found the courtyard that houses the service needed. There was already a line of dozens of other tourists with luggage looking for the same thing. The line moving slow in the turgid heat. In the 90s Fahrenheit? [never got the hang of Celsius]

By the time I got to the window, the weary clerk had nothing I could afford. Wiped out, I realised that outside of London has to be it. First to settle down for some lunch and chill in a park.

This is the busiest city I'd ever visited by then. London is grandiose, its energy in hot weather when sleep deprived and no room had drained me.

I found a good sandwich near the impressive Victoria memorial. I didn't know where I was on this first day, but was impressed despite my exhausted self.. So with a bit of wanderlust left, I walked back towards the central area of the city, passing big crowds for the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace. I had intended to get to the Tate and National galleries, but knew that has to be another time. And sadly missing the local artist show. Disappointing.

Where to go now? I was spent as I ponder this question that needs answering very soon, as the day would end.

MOVING ON

As an option, Grant had tipped me off about a Dutch musician acquaintance he knows in the West Country town of Glastonbury. This sounds perfect. I aim towards the downtown train station as rush hour encroaching, knowing nothing about the British railway system. Turns out that I need to get to a different train station, back the other direction! Exhausted by the wild goose chase in the bustling heat, I decided wisely to not walk and take the tube. I ended up at Picadilly, which made my head spin, — rushing traffic, mohawked punk posers giving the hippy (moi) the snarly eye. I last recall the massive curvature of Regent Street overwhelming my tweaked senses working overtime. I descended the long, steep tubeway escalator with the hordes of 5pm commuters. Packed train, I felt insane, but

eventually worked out the train, only able to get to Bristol being closest station to Glastonbury. I went for it. The train west was mostly filled with business commuters, then there's me, sweaty and wiped out. I would have preferred to soak in views from the train window through the English countryside, but again I needed shut-eye.

WEST

Bristol a few hours later, still light out and a short walk to the nearby hostel. The section of town is dead quiet compared to hectic rush hour London. I need dead quiet after that crazy day. The hostel was after hours, but staff were there, eventually responding to my incessant banging on the door. Listening to my plea for needing sleep after awake for 30 hours and running around London in vain search for a room, they let me in. I napped in the lounge, waiting for word on a room. A really cool African-English woman helps me after delay from lack of check-in staff. Finally got a room in the mostly empty hostel. They put me on a floor where only two Japanese girls were staying down the hall. I can only guess that only a few limited rooms were ready on this unpopulous evening. The chief matron appears, drilling me about can I be trusted to leave the girls alone? Yegadz some of these brits can be awfully suspicious! It must be a bad American reputation. I reassure that I desperately need sleep, and they left me alone. Of course it takes hours before actually sleeping, kept awake by a bee trapped between windows I couldn't open, until it died. Sheesh — what a long ass day.

After a few glorious hours of sleep, I rinse yesterday's sweat at

the tiny sink, and bolt out to a different kind of day. I find a small open corner store and grab a cheese sandwich and tea. At the counter was a personable, cute young blonde woman who lifted the start of my day with her delightful candor. I should've got her number. Ah well, I was a shy boy on a travel agenda.

Onwards to the station, walking through a very sleepy town on a pleasant summer morning, for a nice bus ride through the rolling roads to Glastonbury!

Stops at towns along the way, with a few locals on board, who recognised me as a tourist when I pulled out the camera to take a snapshot of the sign inside the bus that read "MIND YOUR HEAD", which is so British.

At one of the town stops, the young locals were very friendly with me, recommending various attractions around Glastonbury, and to not miss Bath for its Roman ruins and Wells cathedral. [the last two were eventually visited years later]

Beginning to see Glastonbury Tor from the bus was exciting — a distinctive, long green hill in gentle layers of old earth, with a centuries old Anglican tower at the top. A beacon Tor of mythical legends ;mystical, Arthurian, new age, earthy, ancient,... With some dark political / religious history to go with it all. The coach arrived at towns centre. First stop in the travel bureau in a historic stone building, where brochures and maps with bnb's listed. Feeling much better, I next set out to find Grant's Dutch friends house. It is near one of the mystical features; the holy thorn tree on Wearyal Hill. I walk up this mild grassy slope to sketch the view from the bench near the distinct

thorn tree. Definitely a very aged tree with character, well tended to, but I don't need to buy into the credibility of its myths, but just enjoy the mythical legends and the beauty. Finding the house of the Dutch harpist (sign in front has an image of a harp) giving a knock on the door to know Grant's acquaintance to be inviting or not, before committing to a bnb. He answered with indifference, as I explained that I'm Grant's brother and would you recommend a good place to stay in town?

He tersely tells me to visit the travel bureau on Main street (where I'd been) and rapidly brushes me off.

Welllll... Good thing I tested him out. Probably interrupted something important or he's just antisocial.

Whichever way, I went to find an inviting bed & breakfast [The Gables no. 2] run by a charming elderly woman who clearly loved being a hostess, while her husband was more quiet. Warm and inviting with room available. Opposite of London.

I unload the big backpack and set out with the small backpack for exploring Glastonbury. The day was still young!

FINALLY SETTLED ENOUGH

Glastonbury Tor is the central feature, visible from angles all over town and from miles away. I find the path up, beyond peaceful lanes, shaded homes and gardens. White chalk pathway just passing a cow gate. Cleanly cut up the gentle green slope, I walked up, loving the expansive view. Up at the top, approaching the Gothic stone church tower. Pastoral.

I spent hours up there, restoring my nervous system. Drawing and relaxing with the pleasant, balmy views over rolling green

land in all directions. This is perfect.

A few people wander up every half hour or so, including a sweet looking young lady in a hippy skirt with long light brown hair. I am shyly smitten, just smiling back lightly.

Eventually I moved on to explore more of the area, in no hurry, deciding to stay for two more days. Going back to London too soon would mean booking pricy accommodations, that I was in no mood for.

Heading back to the bnb in the late solstice week light, the hostess was happy to see me and that I intend to stay a couple more days. Perfect, since the rooms were booked for the nights following. She invited me into their living room to chat with tea and cakes. So quintessentially English!

Enjoying socialising about several conversational topics, with a dark moment that stood out. When mentioning the Tor, she said *"oh but some days I think of how they hung the last Abbot of England on the Tor, and it's so horrible that I can't look up there."*

I was struck by the sensitivity to this centuries old history, with plenty of bloodbaths in the country's storied past. I felt for a moment in a British tv movie mystery drama scene. Interesting.

GLASTONBURY DAY TWO

I was served a true English brekkie by the delightful hostess, smiling to herself while carrying the tray into the dining room. Beans on toast, tomato, grilled mushrooms, and tea. English living was working for me.

Starting the morning with a cool stroll around Wearyal Hill,

passing an elderly gent, walking his terrier, smoking a classic curved pipe, dressed in tweed, giving a friendly morning greeting. I had the impression that he could have been J. R. R. Tolkien.

I explore more, including the beautiful Chalice Gardens where I spent hours, loving its perfectly harmonising layout. I sketch the Chalice Well down in the shaded heart of this peace sanctuary. [see my Chalice Well writing.]

I met a few hippies peacefully lazing at the Chalice fountain pool, who hailed from Kent. Kindred spirits. I mentioned that I was missing the Grateful Dead in my home town of Minneapolis this day, while they espoused Hawkwind as the British counterpart. A nice time hanging with good people in an idyllic garden.

I walk back up the Tor, deciding to remove shoes and feel the sun warmed chalk path underfoot. Hot sun at the top, I laze with the pastoral view for hours again.

The soundtrack to all all of this, running through my mind while up there, was *Atom Heart Mother* by Pink Floyd, including *Fat Old Sun*; so fitting, with the green cow pastures surrounding in this very English environment at a slow pace. Walking on to enjoy the town in late light, deciding to remain here for the next few days. The bnb hostess hooks me with another nearby bnb, and I get a solid nights sleep.

GLASTONBURY DAY THREE

To the next bed & breakfast, run by a woman with her young teenage son. Nice place, but not as perfect as the previous. I got to the abbey ruins which fascinated, Chalice Gardens again, and the Tor!

Another hot day up there by midday, I take off my shirt and sit in the shade of the tower. The beautiful girl returns! In summer clothes of sleeveless top and skirt. The best. She slowly circles her way around the tower a few times, smiling to me on the pass I smile back, but I stupidly say nothing ; speechless shy. She eventually lays on the grass in front of me, giving perfect opportunity to draw her, incorporated into the scenery. Success — except for my reticence. She may have imagined that I was a traveller with a language barrier. Nope. Just a clueless youngster from Minnesota.

She wanders away, more people arrive to catch the sunset. I realise it's already Friday. I don't want to leave, but I need to get back to London by 3pm Monday for the coach return to Germany. I figured to wing a room outside of London the night before then be refreshed for the return. I wasn't yet a wise travel planner.

GLASTONBURY DAY FOUR

Saturday morning having breakfast at the bnb, with the kid (probably about 13) was cranking up some new wave pop that I didn't know. Not something I would go for, but ok. The mom was telling him to turn it down because it disturbing the guest, but I said that it's not a problem. I think the kid wanted to show

off his modern tastes to the American.

To the Tor again after taking my time around town, I met a friendly eccentric on the way, who appreciated my barefooted ascent up the Tor path, and did the same. He is a total mystic new age freak who had magic wands for divining leylines and tracking ufo's! This guy was the real new age deal, claiming his wands to be more precise than any scientific apparatus. I listened amused and didn't argue. He gave me a few booklets of mystical poetry before going on his way.

I sketched more on this final day. As early evening grew, more and more people were walking up. The weather was perfect, with friendly folks seeing what I was drawing. All wonderful, except the dream girl didn't appear. All well...she gave mystique to my days up there.

Fantastic sunset, then off to sleep.

TIME TO LEAVE GLASTONBURY

Got an early start to get a bus that Sunday morning... A tough bit of news — there are **no** busses running in that area on weekends! Oh no, what to do. The clerk at the visitors centre suggested hitchhiking to the nearest larger town, like Wells, not terribly far away, where busses could be caught to a train station.

Now here is where my peak story begins. [I will separate it out from the entire long winded travelogue, for a more digestible portion.]

WHITE LIGHT ON THE WAY TO STONEHENGE

Within minutes with my thumb out, an older hippy fellow pulls over in a funky old Vauxhall mini stationwagon, dark green, probably a mid 70's model. I tell him where I need to get to, a town with a train station so I can head towards London.

"that's where I'm going, I live near London. Hop on board! Especially if you'd help pay for petrol."

yes! Great!

I get in, he places my luggage in back and off we go. Hendrix tape blasting; this is one cool, mellow dude. Named Jim McDonald, a gardener. He was enjoying Glastonbury for the weekend, and who saw me sketching up on the Tor yesterday evening and didn't want to disturb me. A relieving stroke of good hitchhiking fortune, now without needing to find a train. Early enough to get somewhere on the outskirts of London to probably find a room easier. He tells me about some of his history in the area, of early 70's festivals featuring early era Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin. Fab!

Driving through the small town of Shepton Mallet, finding a tiny open store for some road nourishment, I got a sandwich and a bottle of fresh local milk.

Back on the country road, what is weird to me was being in my first British car ride as a passenger on the other side, and on the opposite side of the road! Discombobulating at first, He asks me if I made it to Stonehenge? I really wanted to but didn't make the effort since being so comfortably settled in

Glastonbury. He says it's on the way! Then needed to check the map for a more direct route there from where we were around Shepton Mallet.

Pulling over at the edge of a curved intersection, to see a map. I was starting to drink my bottle of milk. We need to turn around, back on the road just behind us. Taking a short u-turn on this quiet Sunday morning country road, when suddenly an earth shattering

"BOOM!"

and bright, blinding white light!

Bedazzled void of thought in all shock, until short moments later hearing an angry cockney voice yelling "*what are you doing in the middle of the fooking road!*"

I was sitting tilted to the side slightly. Seeing nothing but white light. Then I heard Jim say "are you alright? I thought the windshield shattered!"

It takes more moments to realise what happened. First, I remove my eyeglasses to find them coated in thick country milk, also dripping inside of the car on the windshield. The car was slanted in the ditch, at an angle where the bright morning sun glared through the windshield and my freshly milk coated spectacles, resulting in blinding white vision.

For a moment it seemed like a death experience would possibly be. Jim thought the dripping sunlit milk was broken glass!

The source of this upset : we were hit by a moving vehicle while taking the u-turn, shoving us partway into the ditch. The impact

causing my nearly full bottle of milk to jolt upwards, strike me in the cheek, with milk catapulting over and through my glasses, and in much of the upper interior of the cab!

I was still clutching the now mostly empty milk bottle, with a bruise on my right cheek where it struck.

Shaking, getting my bearings ; we were okay!

Back to the mad voice. Tough, military, cockney accent, cussing. I take my time to crawl my stunned, quivering self out of the tilted vehicle. We were hit by a brand new black Trans-Am! A kind of American wheels rarely ever seen on English countryside roads. The enraged driver was yelling at Jim, and this guy was Jim's opposite — macho, gruff, military tattoos on the arms. Chewing out Jim who is this mellow folk hippy gardener. The guys trophy wife was there taking notes, probably a lawyer. The Trans-Am suffered a two - inch dent near the headlamp.

The Vauxhall however has a huge caved in dent above the rear wheel, and stuck in the ditch.

After more accusative verbal abuse from Mr Trans-Am, they exchange info to settle this later in court. We managed to push the car off the ditch, and back on the road. Still shaking, and it became even more disturbing to be sitting on opposed sides than accustomed. The mood soured, understandably. Jim said that when doing the u-turn he caught the rapid rear view mirror image of the Trans-Am speeding too fast for action. The tough guy was obviously speeding on a joyride in his new toy muscle car. Otherwise if a little slower, the accident probably would have been avoided. Argh.

Driving on, I felt bad for influence of this accident, which most likely not happened without stopping for my sake. Not my fault, reassured the laid back driver who still wanted to stop at Stonehenge. He actually picked up two hitchhiking girls for a few towns ahead, who helped lift our spirits.

As we started to pass more traffic, we were occasionally honked at.

Huh?

Then we noticed fingers pointed to the rear of the car. We eventually stop to inspect. The axle was slightly bent, giving an appearance that the wheel could wobble dangerously off at any time. *Urgh!* This does not bode well. Nothing is open out there, and now had to pull over every time another car approaches so they won't see the wobble and report it. The plan now was to drive inconspicuous roads, killing time until driving the main motorway after dark, with a long time to go. First we hung out for awhile at a swimming hole that the hitchhiking girls had dropped off at. The water was too marshy for me. We depart from their destination, and crawl the car to nearby Stonehenge. Which was good for me despite the shaky uncertainty about my arrival at the bus in London tomorrow. At worst I lose funds for staying longer. Oh well, enjoy the trip as well as possible!

Stonehenge was fascinating, having the luxury of several good hours wandering around the hallowed grounds surrounding these legendary trilithons. The days shock waves disappeared as archaeological intrigue grew, and I spent quality time drawing my rough charcoal sketches. [smudgy charcoal

was a short lived phase that year]

I wander in solitude most of the visit there, as poor Jim was more into chilling on a grassy knoll off to the side, staring into space. No doubt bummed about his car.

Visiting Stonehenge was historically unfortunate for the timing. On the summer solstice over a week previous, the annual gatherers to witness sunrise were far too many, with the party getting way out of hand. An unfortunate amount of vandals had trashed the environment, climbing the stones, leaving garbage, and left a burning VW bug on the grounds. I caught this news on the BBC at the bnb, and saw it on the headlines of newspapers. Preserving the historical monument is more important, yet wished to be allowed to enter the centre of the stone ring, now roped off with a few guards. It is a popular tourist attraction as one of the prehistoric wonders of the world... and popularity tends to be destructive.

Appreciating the structure, placement and mystery, and the surrounding plains. A modest scattering of other visitors come and go. After plenty of time to soak in each megalith, Jim and I take a walk on some of the distant gravel roads for a few different views of the prominent stones visible for miles. He regaled me with accounts of going here as a kid, far before there was a visitors centre, when it was freely accessible to anyone.

DRIVING ON

Closing time before dusk, needing to risk driving on. We decide to get into an open pub some miles away. Whitbread ale on tap

with fish 'n chips on me. I was grateful for Jim's accommodating patience. He could have told me to sod off, leaving me to thumb another ride from those sleepy Sunday roads. He had no choice but to kill the daylight time anyway, and it was good that he is so chill about everything.

The pub was ideally British (forgetting its name), with polished wood and brass, dark green patches of carpet, shiny ceramic taps, and a terrier dog lounging about with a few locals settled in. Excellent! The pints were extremely refreshing, and to find food. I think the pub closed by dark.

Jim had a new plan. Since he couldn't drive his wobbly car throughout lit streets of London and surrounding, he would have to get to an inconspicuous area, then have it towed after sunrise. He knew of a vacant apartment complex in a rough area of Brixton, worthy trying, risking other freeloaders. Might as well check it out, and at least I'll be close enough to get to my scheduled bus on early time.

BRIXTON

On the main motorway after dark, the troubled wheel was still noticed by a few random drivers, putting us on edge. We make it to the building sometime after 1am, but the complex is no longer vacant, now with new residents. We inspect to find if there are any empty units to break into. Too risky amidst official tenants living there.

Totally spent, with only a few hours to sunrise. The last resort

was to sleep outside — too dangerous in that neighbourhood. We ended up dozing in the car chairs, while parked near an unusual all night bar — or it could have been a party or a clandestine, illegal bar. Safety from possible marauders was the reason for parking near a more populous zone. No sleep, just shut-eye. With late occasional bar (speakeasy?) crawlers passing to and from the shady establishment (?)

THE LAST DAY

Sunrise, I groggily crawl out to pee in the weedy lot nearby. It must've been around 6am, and one of the shabby apartments has *The Dark Side of the Moon* **BLASTING!**

A good, appropriate Pink Floyd sound to wake up to, at this uncouth hour at this unsupervised edge of Brixton.

I bid farewell and thanks to Jim, still zonked in the drivers seat. He asks for a few pounds if I could spare. I obliged apologising for the limited amount. I needed spare change for a tube ride downtown.

Setting off to the nearest station, I don't remember why I only made it partway there. Not enough sufficient change? Or dazed, morning ineptitude?

Finding myself in a nicer neighbourhood near the Thames.

Empty streets, I passed a pay toilet with enough change to use it. The door slides open, with Phil Collins music starting inside. Pants down squatting, turning out to be the bidet side! New to me. Then the door slides open quickly with my pants still down! No one saw, but I truly felt like a character in a British comedy — Monty Python or Mister Bean!

Another fascinating day.

Walking towards the Thames, some very familiar smokestacks become visible above the buildings. The unmistakable album cover for Pink Floyd's *Animals*! Another unexpected Floydian surprise! Battersea Station. I loved it. This has been such a PF trip.

Now that I'm along the Thames, I knew where to go and have a pleasant morning stroll to Trafalgar Square. There is plenty of time to go to the museums! Passing the Tate, I realised the error of this plan — closed on Mondays. *Bummer!*

Oh well, the city itself is interesting enough, and this time there isn't a chase for a nonexistent affordable room. I cash one of my modest travellers cheques to afford lunch and a last tube ride. I spent hours hanging and drawing at Trafalgar Square, hearing chanting protesters in front of the South African embassy. It was memorably catchy and rhythmic : "*Freedom for South Africa! - - - Isolate Botha!*" echoing around the busy Square.

Disappointed with missing the museums, but I fortunately more than made up for it on future visits.

Nearing my time to catch the return coach to the continent but leisurely enough to walk and be early. I bid adieu to the lions, Nelsons Column, the chanting protesters, the pigeons, and as I glanced to my left to see the classical Saint Martin in the Fields building against a clear blue sky, a friendly older gent with a Sir George Martin accent, greets me with "*it's a frightfully lovely day!*" or something of that nature, chatting briefly with me.

Time to go.

A much kinder London day and perfectly not so hot, I enjoyed the walk through thousands of urban details, buzzing with activity. Early for the bus ride all the way to Herford, Germany... Which was gladly forgettable because I slept for nearly the entire journey!

So many impressions, and a few travel lessons: Book accommodations for popular cities in advance.

And don't have an open bottle of thick liquids during u-turns... or you just might momentarily think that you've met the angel of death.

~ ~ ~ Dean Gustafson, March 2021









