

# Festive Season in London



[UPDATE: July, 2011—As I gradually go back over my old travelogues, I'll be leaving the original text intact but adding additional comments in boldfaced enclosed in brackets to expand on what was originally said. I'll also add some additional scanned photos to enhance the original travelogues.]

For as long as I can remember, I've always wanted to go to England. It is, of course, in many ways "the old country", the place from which many of my ancestors came (most of them several hundred years ago) and from which our country gets most of its culture and traditions. **[The Germanic people in the area where I live would argue with that, but for me American culture is firmly rooted in British traditions.]** It also has the advantage of being a foreign country without a foreign language (at least in theory), and it is a vibrant modern country with one of the longest histories on earth.

I've toyed with the idea of going to England many times as an adult, but it always seemed a bit too expensive. Some bad news this past year changed that. With airlines struggling to survive and many tourists scared away by the terrorist attacks on the underground, airfares to London hit rock bottom last summer. In fact, it was cheaper for me to fly to England in 2005 than it was for my parents to visit there back in the '70s. **[The only way my parents were able to make the trip back then was because silver prices had soared. My mother sold the silver flatware they'd been given as a wedding gift and used the proceeds to finance the trip.]**

When I mentioned the cheap fares to my sister Margaret, she was interested in joining me for a holiday trip. Before long we had booked airplane tickets, as well as transit passes, tickets for a play, and admissions to some major tourist attractions. We'd be spending four nights in London during the time between Christmas and New Year that the British call "Festive Season". **[We'd hear the phrase "Festive Season" constantly during this trip, which is why I chose to use it for the title of this travelogue.]**



Standing in two hemispheres at once  
The Prime Meridian – Greenwich Observatory

## Tuesday, December 27, 2005

We had spent Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and what the British call "Boxing Day" down in Oskaloosa, visiting my brothers Stephen and Paul and their families. We had a room at the Oskaloosa Super 8 and had spent a relaxing and enjoyable holiday. Today Paul was leaving to see his wife Nancy's family in Minneapolis today, and both Steve and Terry were working. We spent part of the morning at the hotel. Margaret graded candle-shaped crossword puzzles her Spanish students had done, while I flipped through the channels on TV. **[I must say, Margaret put more effort into her job than almost anyone I know. To me a crossword seems like little more than a time-filler. Years ago when I taught Spanish I recall giving similar holiday worksheets, and I just gave them a quick once-over to make sure they were completed. Margaret, however, literally graded them letter by letter. Her effort honestly struck me as unnecessary, but I certainly wasn't going to tell her what to do.]** There was an amusing report on one of the morning shows about the popularity of dollar stores, reported by someone who it appeared had never shopped at one of them in his life. They reported from a 99¢ Only store in Beverly Hills, finding it an odd location for such a store. That caught my attention, because while I've never been in it, I've actually been past that Wilshire Boulevard store.

Another TV program was especially interesting given that we would be flying today. The A&E cable network had a show called *Airline* that followed employees of Southwest Airlines as they dealt with unusual problems that apparently come up every day. It intrigued me how incredibly rude many of the passengers were. In most cases there was absolutely no way the airline could give them what they wanted. They (Southwest) were trying hard to accommodate the passengers, but anything less than perfection was

apparently inadequate for some of these people. **[As I write this revision, Southwest has been in the news for a tirade by one of their pilots that he was stupid enough to make with the cockpit microphone on. His remarks lamented the fact that supposedly all the flight attendants these days were either “gays or grannies”. His pointless tirade was amazingly similar to the customers’ actions in this documentary.]**

It was foggy outside, which worried me a little. I thought back to the time I visited my friend Sandra in Florida, when I couldn’t leave the Mason City airport because of fog. The travel forecast on the Weather Channel looked good, though, and the local stations in Des Moines said the fog should be clearing by mid-morning, after which it would be a partly cloudy day. That put my mind at ease for a while. Unfortunately mid-morning came, but the fog did not let up. In fact it seemed to get progressively denser. While our flight would not be leaving until late afternoon, I suggested to Margaret that we might be wise to head up to Des Moines earlier to keep our options open in case we needed to take a different flight. **[This is something I worry about every time I fly on a vacation. I’ve never had a trip that was seriously interrupted, and hopefully—knock on wood—that will remain the case. I have had to make some alternate plans at the last minute, though, and since I almost always travel on deeply discounted fares, the alternative options aren’t often the best.]**

We left the hotel around 10:15 and stopped at the Casey’s on the west side of Oskaloosa, so Margaret could buy gas. We left there around 10:30 and headed west up highway 163, the expressway that connects Ottumwa and Des Moines. We were driving two separate vehicles, because Margaret and I would have to head in different directions when we got back. Since I knew the route better, I led, and Margaret tried to follow my taillights in the fog as we made our way northwest. Traffic seemed to be driving every speed imaginable, and I really didn’t know how fast to drive. People passed me as if it were bright and sunny, but with almost no visibility, I chose to err on the side of caution **[which is what I normally do in bad weather]**. It’s normally about an hour from Oskaloosa to Des Moines, but it was almost exactly noon when we reached the airport on the city’s south side. I was a little relieved to see the airport landing lights when I turned onto Fleur Drive in Des Moines. Still it was **VERY** foggy, and I didn’t know exactly what to expect.

We pulled into the “Airport 2” economy lot across the street from the airport. Almost immediately a bus came up to shuttle us to the terminal. The driver was very talkative. He said we shouldn’t worry about the fog, that planes had been taking off all morning. **[What he didn’t say—which was really more important—was that almost no planes had been landing. That meant there weren’t any planes on the ground to take off this afternoon.]** He noted, though, that the bowl-bound Iowa State football team was right now waiting inside the terminal, because their flight had been delayed. He also said we were smart to park in the economy lot (which is far cheaper than the other airport lots). He was visiting his son in the coming week and would be parking there himself. On the short trip to the terminal we also found out that his son was a New Year’s baby, but he had just missed getting the prize for first baby of the year. I think we’d have heard the driver’s full life story if the trip had been any longer.

I had checked in for our flight online, but the boarding passes I’d printed out said that since we had an international connection, we would have to stop at the desk to have an agent check our passport. We stopped, and a rather bored woman gave the most cursory check to our documents. She didn’t mark our boarding passes in any way nor enter anything in her computer. Clearly we could have just bypassed the desk and headed straight to security.

There was a line at security, but it moved along efficiently. Neither Margaret nor I had any problem. Our flight was not yet on listed on the departure screen, but we found the assigned gate, which was very crowded. At the gate, Northwest listed four of its flights as “delayed”, and almost immediately after we arrived they announced that two of those flights were cancelled. The planes that would have been used for those flights were unable to land in Des Moines due to the fog and had been diverted to Kansas City. During the next few hours we’d hear announcements from United, America West, and Delta about incoming flights that were diverted and outgoing flights that were cancelled. Since their bankruptcy, Northwest has reduced its London service to just one flight a day (leaving from Detroit), so if our flight from Des Moines were cancelled, it would pretty much goof up the whole vacation.

Northwest’s gate area was crowded with people whose flights were delayed or cancelled, with very little room for anyone else. We wandered the concourse and eventually found an empty waiting area by one of the United gates. This gate was supposed to serve a flight to Denver that had long since been cancelled. Margaret had several letters to mail, and I spent a bit of time trying to find a place to mail them. It turned out that the gift shop had a mail drop, though there was nothing outwardly indicating they’d take letters. We did manage to get everything mailed, though. **[There are several times I’ve been at airports and wanted to mail something, but I’ve been unable to find a place to do so. It may be that most gift shops take letters, but that’s certainly not something that would occur to me. Very few airports seem to have those blue postal service boxes, which seems strange to me given that frequently the regional postal sorting facility is right at the airport.]**

While we waited, I started a fascinating book called *Garbage Land* that I would continue reading in bits and pieces throughout this trip. The book traces exactly what happens to things that are thrown out, whether they’re put in the trash or a recycling bin. Surprisingly, it’s not a preachy book, and its political agenda doesn’t fit most traditional molds. It basically notes that there’s trade-offs in everything, with no hard and fast rules saying one thing is always better or worse than another. About the only sure way to deal with the problem of waste is to create less of it. The author proposes putting the burden for waste on manufacturers rather than consumers, taking ideas like “bottle bills” and expanding them to include all forms of packaging as well as products themselves. She feels that only when disposing of things becomes an economic issue for businesses will we see any real progress in solving the problem. **[I strongly agree with that, but as long as our government is dominated by corporate interests, it’s unlikely anything like that will happen.]**

As we waited we heard cancellations or delays for flights to Atlanta, Cincinnati, Denver, Chicago, Minneapolis, Memphis, Las Vegas, St. Louis, and Phoenix. We also learned of flights that were supposed to land in Des Moines that had been diverted to Kansas City, Waterloo, and Moline. Apparently if the fog was too thick at the scheduled landing time the flights would circle Des Moines for up to half an hour. If visibility was still too low for landing, the flight was then diverted—which in most cases would also screw up a corresponding outgoing flight.

Toward mid-afternoon I saw some people walking toward the exit who had obviously gotten off a recently landed plane. I crossed my fingers that the fog might be clearing, though it was still pea soup out the windows. I went over to the Northwest area and noticed that the mid-afternoon flight from Detroit had been assigned a scheduled landing time and that the corresponding departure for Detroit was listed as “delayed” but not cancelled. While this was not our flight, I suggested to Margaret that we might want to move over to the Northwest area so we could follow any changes more closely.

We made our way to a lounge that was mostly occupied by members of the Central College women’s basketball team and their coaches. They were apparently playing in a holiday tournament in southern California and were scheduled to fly via Minneapolis to LAX. Unfortunately their flight out of Des Moines this morning had been cancelled. The coach, a very efficient woman about my age, had just finished making the alternate arrangements as we arrived. Apparently the girls would be taking college vans to Minneapolis, where they would stay overnight. They’d were confirmed on three different flights out of MSP tomorrow morning, some of them going to LAX and others to Ontario airport. They would rent vehicles at both airports to reach their ultimate destination somewhere in the L.A. suburbs. (We found out later that the ISU football team also could not fly out of Des Moines. They had to be bused to Moline to get a flight to their bowl game.)

The Central girls gathered their stuff and left as other passengers scrambled to re-arrange their plans. Surprisingly everyone seemed remarkably calm and resigned to the weather. There was none of the screaming the Southwest employees on *Airline* had to put up with. Northwest made it clear that they would accommodate everybody, but those accommodations would probably not get everybody to their destination at the originally scheduled times.

One of the passengers in our waiting area was a young man with a slight foreign accent who seemed to have his life’s possessions in a backpack. He was flying to Detroit, with a tight connection on to Frankfurt, Germany. He was notably relieved when the flight from Detroit landed, and obviously pleased when they called his flight to board. The flight left about half an hour late, but he was confident he could make the connection.

It turned out that we probably could have gotten stand-by seats on the afternoon flight to Detroit. Unfortunately when they made the announcement that seats were available Margaret had left to go exploring, so we couldn’t take advantage of it. They had closed the jetway by the time she got back.

Across from us in the lounge was a woman that was a bit too friendly, trying to make conversation with everyone around her. When she chatted with us and found out our travel plans, she laughed that it was ironic that people traveling to London of all places might be inconvenienced by fog in Iowa.

It continued to be foggy throughout the afternoon, but apparently visibility improved enough that planes could finally get in without any real problems. **[I’ve often wondered just what the visibility requirements are for landing planes, since on multiple occasions I’ve landed when the visibility has seemed pretty minimal. There obviously are minimum standards, though, and the standards for landing appear to be much stiffer than those for taking off.]** The scheduled afternoon arrivals were mostly on-time, and before long scheduled afternoon departures took off before flights to the same cities that were still delayed from midday. Another Northwest plane from Detroit arrived right on time at 4:17pm. By 4:30 they announced boarding for all rows, and we hurried down the jetway. They closed the doors at 4:45, ten minutes before our scheduled departure time. We were in the air before 5pm—most thankful to be leaving foggy Des Moines.

The fog layer was very thin. Within just a couple of minutes we had cut through the clouds and were looking at the sunset over clear skies. It’s amazing that such a small bit of weather could cause so many problems.

Our flight attendant was a middle aged woman with a striking accent that got us in the mood for Britain. I think she was actually Canadian, rather than British, a fact that was made more likely when it was announced that the “Detroit-based flight crew” thanked us for flying Northwest. Detroit is the largest U.S. city on the Canadian border, and a fair number of people live on one side of the border and work on the other. It would be quite possible this woman could hail from Windsor, Ontario.

Wherever she might have been from, the stewardess certainly didn’t have much to do on this flight. After the safety instructions, her only job on the hour and a half flight was to pass out cans of pop. We didn’t even get those little bags of pretzels.

Something must have been wrong with the air conditioning on this plane, because it was a **very** warm flight. I had worn a sweater, being used to flights that are a bit on the cool side if anything. On this plane, I wished I was sweating.

Besides the heat, the flight was uneventful. It quickly became dark, and I basically just read a bit in my book during a very smooth trip. We landed about twenty-five minutes early but then had a long taxi to the gate. We then had to wait, because there was another plane at our gate. It turned out that plane had mechanical problems and couldn’t leave the gate, so we had to wait some more for a gate to be reassigned. We went to the alternative gate, but we then had to wait for a jetway driver to come so they could hook the

moving hallway up to the plane. The whole process took about half an hour, and it was about five minutes after the scheduled arrival time when they finally opened the doors. **[I have wondered numerous times why major airports with tons of available gates can't get their act together to get planes to and from the gates efficiently. It always seems as if half the gates in many airports are never used, and the others are booked back to back, causing delays like this.]**

We arrived at DTW's Concourse C, which was undergoing construction. There was virtually nothing on that concourse other than a couple of gates. We followed signs to an underground walkway that connected the airport's three parallel concourses. The tunnel was interesting. They have moving walkways along the length, and they provide entertainment in the form of an ever-changing light show and recorded nature sounds (like wind and thunderstorms). The only annoying thing, given that we were rushing a bit to make the connection, was that several people were sort of lollygagging on the moving walkways, ignoring the rule to stand on the right and walk on the left. **[This is a pet peeve of mine. However, even when people do stand where they should, moving walkways are often too narrow for passing—particularly with luggage in tow.]**

We arrived on Concourse A, and it was convenient that our gate (A36) was right by the exit from the tunnel. I had suspected that the cursory check they'd given our passports in Des Moines probably wasn't sufficient, so I went up to the desk at the gate to make sure everything was in order. The woman there asked for our passports and spent quite a while entering information from them into her computer—precisely what the check-in people at the so-called Des Moines "International" Airport should have done hours earlier. **[For our upcoming trip to Iceland, the airline required all the passport information up front when we bought our ticket. I'll be intrigued to see what they require when we leave Minneapolis for that flight.]**

I had brought a couple of TCBY gift certificates with me that I had gotten through the Garrigan scrip program. There was a TCBY near our gate, so I went there to get some waffle cones for Margaret and me. The attendant took my order, but he refused to take the gift certificates. When I asked why, he quite rudely told me "we're independently owned, so we don't have to". At this point he had already made the cones, so I got out cash to pay the exorbitant cost (\$3 each). I had an egg nog yogurt, while Margaret had vanilla. They were good, but overpriced, and I'm still rather upset that they wouldn't take the gift certificates. I just contacted TCBY about the issue. While I doubt they'll actually do anything about it, I think they should know that one of their franchisees is not following company protocol. **[I received an apology and some more gift certificates, which is a pretty typical response for complaining to a company. There aren't a lot of TCBY locations near me, and I remember having to go searching to find one so I could use both the original and bonus gift certificates. A lot of companies exclude their airport locations from gift cards. That's because the airport concessions are actually contracted by a separate company that just franchises the name but isn't a "real" location of the main company. They pay different franchise fees than "real" restaurants, which is why they aren't bound by the standard rules. In most cases the exception is part of the fine print on the back of the gift certificate or card. TCBY didn't have any exceptions stated (though apparently they list them on their website). I don't think TCBY is even part of the scrip program these days, so I haven't been able to check whether they've changed their policies or made the exceptions more clear.]**

I had barely gotten back with the yogurt when it came time to board the plane (starting at 8:35 for a 9:25 departure). We were toward the back of the plane, so we boarded quickly. Our seats, "H" and "J" in a row somewhere in the 30s were side by side on the right side of the Airbus 333 plane with a 2-4-2 configuration. Margaret took the window seat, which had some strange box on the floor that obstructed her legroom. I checked after getting home, and apparently certain rows (including both of the ones we'd be in on this trip) have this box in Seat J. It holds electronic equipment that runs the in-flight audio-visual entertainment. I would think it would make more sense to put this in the overhead area, where it would just slightly lessen the amount of luggage space. Margaret didn't complain much, but I must say I was thankful the aisle seat didn't have that box.

Also annoying was music that they played quite loudly as we boarded. The music was a brief excerpt from some symphony that played over and over again until they finally closed the doors. It reminded me of the train we were on out in California where there was some malfunction in the music system and they broadcast country music throughout the train for most of the trip from Los Angeles to Oakland. This was probably better music, but it was more annoying because it was louder.

I wrote in my notebook from the trip that this was "a full flight with many interesting people". A week later as I write this I couldn't tell you anything specific about a single one of those people, so perhaps they weren't quite so interesting after all. The flight was certainly full, though. I don't think there was an empty seat anywhere on board. This plane was significantly smaller than the 747s that used to run on this route, and I think at least over the holidays they could have used the jumbo. **[Planes like the Airbus 333, the Boeing 777 with the same configuration, and the even smaller 767 have almost completely taken over the Trans-Atlantic routes. That's because these are all twin engine planes, rather than the quad-engine design that the old 747s, DC-10s, and L1011s had. With half the engines they use A LOT less fuel, which means lower costs for the airlines. They still use jumbos on many Trans-Pacific flights, mostly because they have a longer flying range. Even on those, though, the planes are gradually down-sizing.]**

The doors closed promptly at 9:15. The pilot then came on to explain to us what would be happening next. It was misting in Detroit, and our plane needed to be de-iced. The captain explained that we'd be backing away from the gate but then parking. They'd seal off the vents and then spray de-icing fluid all over the wings. That was precisely what happened.

They used the intervening time to run the safety announcement over the little TVs that set in the backs of all the seats (the same set-up we'd had flying to France a few years back). Both Margaret and I got a laugh out of this, because it reminded us of the bilingual church service my brother Paul had officiated at on Christmas Eve. At that service the English language minister used any

number of flowery expressions that would be difficult or impossible to translate. Most of the time Paul (who runs Oskaloosa's Hispanic ministry) just cut to the point and got the idea across much more simply in Spanish. Most amusing was when he translated the English phrase "let us put ourselves in an attitude of prayer" with the single Spanish word "oremos". This recording was a lot like that. It was supposedly bilingual in English and French, but the English was **much** longer than the French. In English, for instance, they gave a detailed explanation of exactly how and when we should fasten our seat belt, while Francophones were just given the simple command "fasten your seat belt".

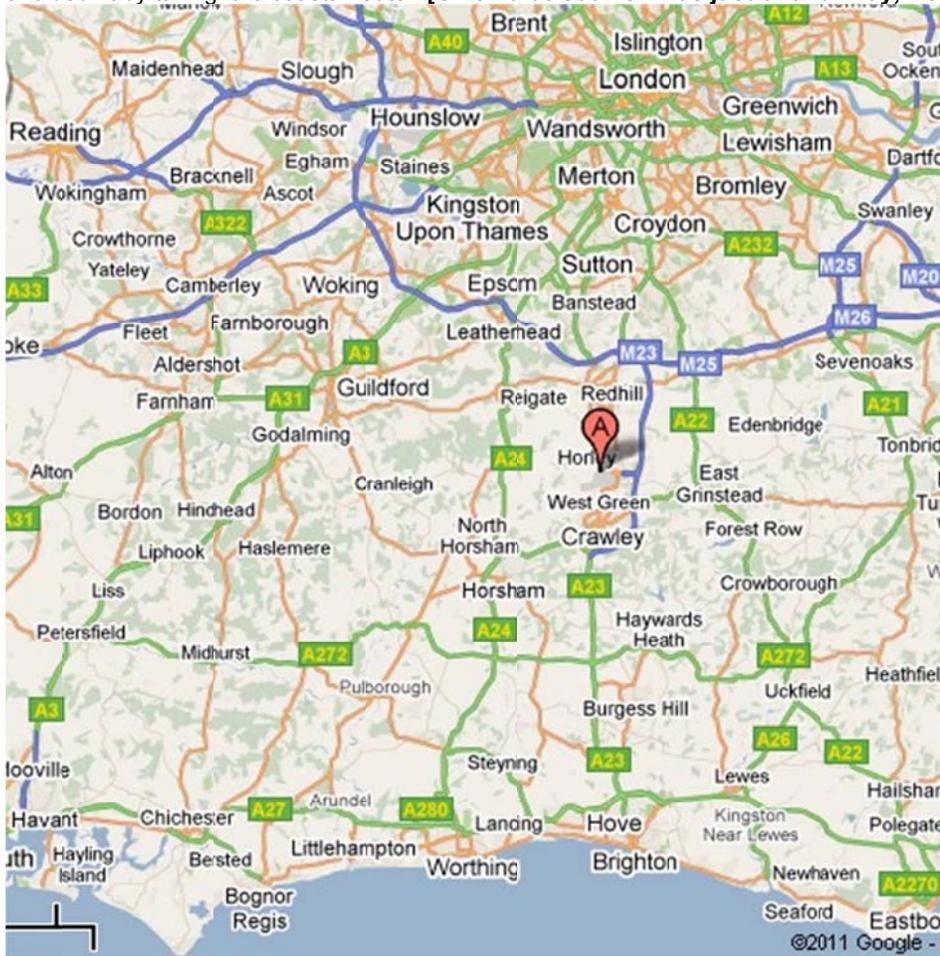
By the time they de-iced the plane it was 9:37pm. We taxied for a while and finally were in the air at 9:50. Dinner was served fairly quickly, and while 10:30 at night (or even 9:30 Central Time) seems awfully late for dinner, it wasn't a bad meal. Margaret had a chicken breast with white sauce, while I had pasta for my main course. There were also vegetables, a nice salad, and a brownie. The food was a little on the cold side (probably because it was so close to the start of the flight), but I finished all of it anyway.

After supper they turned out the lights so we could attempt to sleep. There was a lot of turbulence during the night, so I can't say I did much more than rest my eyes. Mostly I stared at the map of our location on the video screen. We slowly made our way across Ontario, Quebec, and Newfoundland; and I felt we were making real progress by the time we crossed under Greenland and Iceland. It's a long way to Europe, though, and the little plane figure seemed to move very slowly.

## Wednesday, December 28, 2005

Besides turbulence, nothing much happened during the night. By the time we were over Ireland we were on track to land nearly an hour ahead of schedule. Our tickets said the only food we'd be served was dinner, but they actually served a decent breakfast too. We got egg sandwiches (fried egg and cheese on an English muffin, with no meat), a cup of yogurt, a dish of fruit cocktail, juice, and coffee.

We could see from the map that as we approached Britain the plane was deviating off course. Instead of angling across central England, we cut south across Cornwall and followed the coast along the English Channel east to Brighton. Having done something similar last summer when I flew to Florida, I'd assume there was some sort of inland weather system in England, and we avoided it by taking the coastal route. **[Given that Gatwick has just one runway, we may have been taking an approach that let us use that with the prevailing wind, too.]**



Location of Gatwick Airport – West Sussex, England

We flew straight north from Brighton and landed at Gatwick Airport (which is pretty much in the middle of nowhere, almost exactly halfway between London and Brighton) precisely at 9:25am, thirty-five minutes before the scheduled arrival time. We'd eat up most of that time, though, waiting to get to a gate. From a pilot's point of view, Gatwick has to be one of the most inconvenient airports there is anywhere. The gates are arranged in little cul de sacs, with long, narrow approaches. On one side is the terminal, and on the other a wall that separates the airport from a motorway (British word for "interstate"). The space between is barely wide enough for a plane to fit through, and it takes a lot of tight maneuvering to actually get up to the gates. We had to wait for another plane to back out of the gate and negotiate the cul de sac before we could slowly make our way down it.

The delay gave us a chance to look out at the dozens of other airplanes that were lined up at Gatwick's gates. The majority bore the logo of Virgin Atlantic, which has its main international hub here. The rest, though, represented every airline you could imagine—plus many I had never heard of in my life. I got the feeling every airline on earth must do precisely what Northwest does, run one flight a day in and

out of Gatwick. **[A lot actually run several daily flights. For instance, Spanair flies from Gatwick to Málaga on Spain's Costa del Sol literally every hour.]**

Not only is Gatwick a bad airport for pilots, but it's far from convenient for passengers. At the end of the jetway we followed sign for "IMMIGRATION, CUSTOMS, AND ARRIVAL", and we made our way to the left. We walked so far trying to reach customs, I almost felt as if we'd walked all the way to London. While it wasn't 30 miles (the distance to central London), it was about a fifteen-minute walk (which could easily be one mile) to customs. That included going up and then down two separate sets of escalators and down hallway after hallway after hallway. **[With all the tunnels and skywalks, I really do wonder why they don't have more space for the planes around the terminals.]** Eventually we reached an enormous underground complex filled with thousands of people arriving on mid-morning flights from around the world.

The mob split into about twenty individual queues (British word for "lines") for immigration. The rightmost lanes were for citizens of European Union nations and moved along quickly. The rest covered passport-holders from around the world, which required somewhat more lengthy inspection. The lines moved fairly quickly, though many people were given quite thorough questioning. Most interesting was an elderly white woman who was a little ways in front of us. She was questioned at great length, though to me she seemed one of the least suspicious people in the crowd. I remembered years ago when my brother John and I watched my parents go through customs at O'Hare when they came back from England. Most of the people on that line were given the run-around, while they were just waved on through. To me this woman seemed much like my parents, but I guess there must have been something not quite right about her documents.

Before we had gotten to the front of our line, an officer opened up a new desk, accepting people from ours and two other nearby lines. Unfortunately the person in front of us, an elegantly dressed black woman, seemed reluctant to go to her desk. Twice the new desk was open, but someone else went there while the woman in front of us just stood at the front of the line.

Once a space was finally open in our line, the black woman was processed fairly quickly. The officer waved me to the desk and asked if I was traveling with anyone else. I said I was with my sister, and he waved Margaret up there too. **[That's really quite unusual, since normally only married couples or parents with children are processed together at customs.]** He glanced at our landing cards, asked a few cursory questions (confirming that ours was a "holiday" trip and that we were returning home at the end of it), then stamped our passports and sent us on our way. Technically we were granted "leave to enter the United Kingdom for six months", though we'd be forfeiting five months and twenty-seven days of that visa.

Beyond immigration was the customs area. There were two entrances, one for those with items to declare and the other for those without dutiable goods. We went to the green lane and made our way past a guard who didn't seem to be doing much of anything. The lane snaked past several desks, all of which were completely unattended. We reached an exit without even talking with a customs officer and were in the arrivals hall. While Margaret and I honestly didn't have anything questionable with us, any drug smuggler could have chosen the same lane and gotten in with his stash.

The arrivals hall at Gatwick was even more of a madhouse than immigration. There were probably more people, and they weren't in any sort of an organized queue. **[The crowd actually reminded me of a third world airport.]** The place was basically a big shopping mall, and thousands of people seemed to be making their way from store to store wheeling luggage behind them.

We made our way through the mob, stopping only briefly at an ATM to get some British pounds. (My brother John and his wife Janet had given Margaret and me £20 each for Christmas, but it we knew we'd need a lot more than that to cover our trip to a very pricey city. **[!!!—To date London is easily the most expensive place I've been, though Reykjavik may give it a challenge.]**) While the ATM ("cash point" in British parlance) asked a few more questions than its American counterparts, it wasn't hard to use. It was also by far the best way to exchange money. While there were seemed to be a "bureau de change" on every corner in London (and probably a dozen of them at Gatwick), they all gave horrible rates of exchange. The one next to the ATM would sell British currency at a rate of \$1.88 per pound and then buy back surplus pounds at a rate of \$1.64. I knew that right before we left the official exchange rate was about £1 = \$1.75, so I knew \$1.88 was a rip-off. In the city most banks and exchange bureaus charged about \$1.80 per pound—with a commission on top of that. When I got home I did the math on my bank statement to figure the exchange rate I'd gotten from the ATM. It turned out to be about \$1.73, with no fees or commission at all. The same "Shazam" card I use at home seemed to work in every ATM in England, and it gave by far the best deal on British currency. **[I really wonder why so many exchange bureaus even exist in the modern world. I can't imagine there's all that much demand for changing foreign cash in this electronic age.]**

While the bureaux de change **[and the French spelling does appear to be the preferred British plural]** were rip-offs, their rates were outstanding compared to one other method of exchange. At the airport I saw a machine in which you could insert dollars or euros (in either bills or coins) and receive British currency in return. There was a chart on the machine saying exactly what you'd get for each item you inserted. Doing the math, the exchange rate worked out to about \$2.50 per pound, a pretty stiff premium for the convenience of a machine. **[The machine was unusual in that it accepted coins. Most banks and exchange bureaus refuse coins, which makes them essentially worthless. In this age of high-value coins, being able to exchange them might be worth the premium.]**

The basis of British money is, of course, the pound. The pound (or sterling or "quid") today is a gold-colored coin that looks very similar to a euro but is worth half again as much. **[The value compared to the euro has gone down a lot in recent years; it's now just £1 = €1.15 The pound has also gone down only slightly against the dollar. The current rate is £1 = \$1.65.]** Since the '70s each pound has been divided into 100 pence. (Before that it was 20 shillings, with 12 pence per shilling). Pence are abbreviated

with the letter “p”, and people often say “p” instead of “pence” when giving prices. (Apparently in the pre-decimal system, the symbol for the old pence was—oddly—“d”.) The copper 1p coin (worth about 2¢) is just slightly larger than an American penny. There is also a copper 2p (4¢) coin about the size of a quarter. Neither of these coins is used very much, since most prices are rounded to 5p (or even 50p) increments. The 5p (9¢) coin looks like an American dime, and the 10p (18¢) coin is almost identical to a Canadian quarter (same size and shape as an American quarter, but with a picture of the queen on it.) There’s a small hexagonal 20p (35¢) coin and a large octagonal 50p (88¢) coin. Besides the pound coin there is a £2 coin (\$3.50 in value) with a silver center and gold border. Supposedly in 2006 they’ll be introducing a £5 coin, which would be worth about \$8.75. **[While five pound coins do not exist, they apparently rarely circulate. The big change since our visit is that they’re phasing out paper £5 notes in favor of vinyl ones that supposedly last longer and reduce counterfeiting.]**

Like most foreign currency, British notes get larger in size as they increase in value. The smallest note today is £5 (\$8.75), which is a blue bill smaller than American money. The orange £10 (worth \$17.50, and basically the standard currency of the country) note is about the same size as American bills, while the purple £20 (\$35) note is significantly larger than our money. Apparently £50 (\$87.50) notes are also commonly used, but I never saw one. British money is unique in having people’s pictures on both sides of the bill. An extremely outdated portrait of the queen (probably from the silver jubilee back in the ‘70s) appears on what is officially the front of each note, while famous British people (the current series appears to feature scientists) are on the back. There are numerous security features (holograms, watermarks, etc.) on every bill, but—unlike with euros—no one in the stores actually seemed to check for any of them.

Britain is a **very** expensive country. This is partly because of the value added tax (VAT) that adds 17½% to the price of just about everything. Even that doesn’t account for most of the difference, though. Spain had that same tax at about the same rate, yet prices there seemed cheap. Time and again in London I saw prices that seemed logical, if the currency they were in had been dollars. When multiplied by 1.75, though, they were astronomical. The fact that McDonalds in Britain have a “pound menu” equivalent to the “dollar menu” in America is just one example of this. In some cases the prices would be high even in dollars. Furniture and electronics, for example, seem to cost more than double what they would at home. People must make good wages here, because otherwise no one could afford to live. (After getting back I researched wages a bit. Minimum wage in England is £5.05 per hour, which would be about \$8.85. One source said the “average British professional worker”—whatever that may mean—earns £50,000 or more than \$87,000 annually. I also found that drivers on the tube trains make £35,000 or around \$61,000 a year.)

There are several options for transportation to get from Gatwick to central London. Right after booking the plane tickets, I had chosen the Gatwick express, a train that shuttles back and forth between the airport and Victoria Station in London. While not the cheapest option **[indeed only a taxi is more expensive]**, this had the advantage of being easy to deal with. I could book the tickets online, and dedicated platforms at both Gatwick and Victoria served only this train, so it wasn’t hard to find.

We found the train quickly and made our way on board. A multilingual announcement welcomed everybody, and before long a conductor (a college-aged black man) came through the aisle. My online booking said I just needed to provide the confirmation number, not an actual ticket. The conductor looked at the e-mail confirmation I had and typed the number (actually a series of letters) into a handheld computer terminal, which printed out a receipt. Shortly after that a woman came through the aisle with a “buffet (BOO-fay) trolley” **[a surprising pronunciation, given that I’d always heard the Brits sounded the “T” in buffet]** selling overpriced (even by British standards) snacks and beverages.



**David Burrow in an empty Gatwick Express car**

Gatwick Airport is located near the town of Crawley, a self-contained suburb well south of London. Just north of there is the London greenbelt, a rural area of mixed farms, forests, and villages in which urban development is prohibited. The greenbelt was intended to contain the limits of London, but in reality it basically functions as a big park in an urban area that covers pretty much all of

southeast England. People apparently commute to the city all the way from Brighton and Canterbury, every bit as far from London as Joliet is from Chicago or San Bernardino is from Los Angeles.)

Beyond the greenbelt are the “Surrey suburbs” and then the outer boroughs of greater London itself. Greater London (population 7,500,000) is what most people define as the “city limits” of a place that doesn’t fit well into traditional definitions of city. The place functions as a British county—a level of government roughly equivalent to a U.S. state. Greater London is subdivided into thirty-two “boroughs” (which are smaller than, but roughly equivalent to New York’s five boroughs), plus the traditional “City of London” a tiny enclave where virtually no one lives but vast sums of money change hands. Greater London is presided over by an elected mayor, a jovial man named Ken Livingstone, whose picture smiles from billboards all over the city in much the way that Stalin’s picture smiled across Russia decades ago. Each of the boroughs also has a mayor. In most boroughs this is a ceremonial post that rotates among members of the local council. In some, though, it is an extremely powerful elected position. Each borough is governed differently, according to its own set of rules. The boroughs in turn are divided into districts, which are basically neighborhoods but have their own governmental structure. Most of the districts were in ancient times individual villages that have grown together into modern London.

What modern London is exactly isn’t at all well defined. Just as New Yorkers define themselves by their neighborhood, Londoners often won’t say they live in London, but rather in some individual district. People speak of places like “Wimbledon” and “Bow” as if they were still little villages, rather than large neighborhoods in a truly enormous city. Even more confusing, people outside the greenbelt refer to themselves as Londoners, and the London tube serves destinations that are well outside of Greater London. Various estimates put the “London metropolitan area” at between 15 and 20 million people, or about a third of the population of the United Kingdom.

The first London borough we came to was Croydon (pronounced “CRIED’n”), which *Time* magazine recently described (in an article on binge drinking in England) as “a bleak suburb”. If you consider it a suburb, I suppose “bleak” is a fitting term. If you think of it as urban, though, it’s not unpleasant at all. The place is a mix of brick rowhouses, brick duplexes, and brick apartment towers, with brick shops, brick warehouses, brick schools, and a brick prison thrown into the mix. I turned to Margaret as we passed through and asked her whether the whole country was made of brick, an observation she confirmed from her earlier visits here was true. While it’s much newer, Croydon reminded me a lot like Philadelphia. You won’t find a lot of green space in Croydon, but neither will you see the flimsy pole buildings and tacky strip malls that dot every American suburb.



**Battersea Power Station – London, England**

We made our way north through denser and denser brick neighborhoods that made up London’s south side. Eventually we reached Clapham Junction, a major railway interchange where trains diverge to all parts of the country. We veered west there and headed north past the famous Battersea Power Station, an immense work of engineering whose shell (now a historic landmark and

soon to house a shopping mall) sits on the south bank of the Thames. We then crossed a bridge into Westminster and soon stopped inside the vast train shed of one of the world's biggest railway stations.



**Christmas tree and crowd at Victoria Station**

a real underground entrance.

Long before leaving I had ordered “travelcards” from the Transport for London website. TfL offers many different options (too many really), though none of their options precisely fit our needs. While we would be in London for four days and would mostly travel in three of their travel zones, the most economical option was to purchase a seven-day travelcard that was valid for unlimited rides in four zones of travel. (Most options less than seven days would not be valid at rush hours; those that were and added up to four days cost more than the seven-day card. The seven-day cards were only sold for even numbers of zones, so “1-3” wasn’t an option.) The card we bought would be valid on pretty much any form of public transit that operates in Greater London, including services run by more than a dozen separate companies that fall under the umbrella of Transport for London (which is basically a regulatory agency). It would be like having a single card that worked for both the ‘L’ and Metra in Chicagoland or for the subway, the PATH trains, the Long Island Railroad, the JFK Airtrain, and all the various bus companies that operate in New York.

The convenience of that single card doesn’t come cheap, nor is anything at all cheap about London transport. Our cards cost about £35 (over \$60) each, but they were cheap compared to buying individual fares. When we were there the cheapest cash fare (valid in just a single zone) was £2 (it increased to £3 or \$5.25 on January 2), with rates increasing rapidly to as much as £7 (\$12.25) per ride. Perhaps needless to say virtually no one actually pays cash for transit rides in London. Most use the same unlimited travelcards we did, but TfL is making a big push to get people to switch to “Oystercard”, a prepaid plastic card you tap on a pad in front of the turnstile. Each time you tap the card, your account is debited, but at a cheaper rate than the cash fare.

The travelcards work a lot like tickets on the Washington D.C. metro. You insert them into the front of a turnstile at the beginning of your trip. The card pops out, and picking it up causes two plastic barriers to spring open. At your destination you insert your card again. If it’s valid for the zone you get off in, you grab it again to open the gate and leave. I’m not sure what happens if you are in an invalid zone. (We never did, since four zones covers pretty much everywhere anyone would want to go in Greater London; actually three zones would be plenty in most cases.) Supposedly, though, you’re supposed to pay a penalty fare of £20 if you go outside your valid area. There’s no way, though, once you’re in the system to add fare or buy a supplementary ticket.

The London underground (“the tube”) is made up of about a dozen separate lines. These were all started by competing companies, yet (unlike New York) there’s surprisingly little duplication in the network. The lines provide fairly comprehensive service in central London and branch out to serve neighborhoods in most parts of the city. South London (which is where we would be staying) has a lot more gaps than the rest of the city, yet even so nothing anywhere in London is more than about a mile from a tube station.

There are two types of tube lines in London. The earliest lines, which were originally operated by steam trains, were built right underneath the surface. In some cases they still have the open cuts where the trains vented their smoke a century and a half ago. Located right below street level, these are generally accessed by a couple short flights of stairs. Most of the lines we used, though, were **very** deep lines. London pioneered the deep bore tunneling technique that has become standard for subways all over the world.

We left the train quickly and made our way into the vast central hall of Victoria Station. Like Gatwick Airport, this is basically a big shopping mall, though at Victoria the shops were not climate controlled. It was more than a little chilly as the winter wind whipped in from the tracks, but shoppers still milled about as passengers waited for their trains. We followed signs for “UNDERGROUND” and were surprised to soon find ourselves going up an escalator and outside to the street. **[It did surprise me that there wasn’t a direct indoor connection to the tube station.]** I snapped a picture of a line of classic London cabs, and we then made our way back inside and followed other signs to

The line we used most, the Northern Line, had until quite recently (when the “chunnel” was built linking England and France) the longest deep bore tunnel on earth. The deep lines are reached by escalators, and often more than one escalator is required to actually reach the platforms. **[They seem to use a standard length of escalator, rather than adapting the length to fit the need like more modern systems do.]** Going from street level to the platforms easily adds a good five minutes to the length of an underground trip.

Pretty much every escalator in London is identical. Until just a few years back the city had ornate, old-fashioned wooden escalators. A tragic fire made them quickly replaced all those old works of art. Today pretty much every tube station in London has a set of three parallel stainless steel escalators—one in each direction, with the third changing direction at rush hour. The escalator wells are lined with advertising posters, and the exact same posters are found in every station in the city. Many are ads for plays in the West End theatres or for recently released movies (most notably the gay cowboy flick *Brokeback Mountain* **[a huge oversimplification of that Oscar-winning film]** and the film version of the play *The Producers*). There are also ads for modern electronic devices and the stores that sell them, for scores of different cell phone plans (called “mobiles” or “MOW-by-uls” in British speak), for non-profit organizations (particularly those that deal with sex and its associated diseases), and for clothing. Most noteworthy among these endless posters was one for a tight-fitting white boxer brief made by Fruit of the Loom and sold by a company called “figleaves.com”. Every single station had several of these posters featuring a well-endowed young man sprawled on a blanket and clad only in the product. This was amusing because in several stations (including the one by our hotel) people had placed wads of chewing gum in “strategic” positions on the posters creating some interesting effects I’m sure the advertiser hadn’t imagined.



**Website photo of security cameras in a London tube station**

of the bombings last summer) I never sensed anything that made the expense of all those electronics seem justified. London is not at all a dangerous city. The locals seem paranoid about the **possibility** of crime (even more than Americans are), but the reality is that not a whole lot of serious crime happens here—either above or below ground.

In addition to the posters, I couldn’t help but notice something modern England is famous for—security cameras. Britain seems to take a dubious pride in having more security cameras than any other country on earth, more even than America. Each escalator is watched by about three separate cameras, so each passenger can be easily tracked as he makes his way downstairs. There are, of course, also cameras in the ticket halls and in each public area below ground. The platforms themselves might as well be TV studios. Where in Chicago or New York you might see cameras at either end of the platform, here there are cameras pointing both directions every twenty or thirty feet, as many as twelve on a single platform. In booths in the ticket lobby two or three employees monitor all those cameras. It all seems like overkill to me, and (in spite

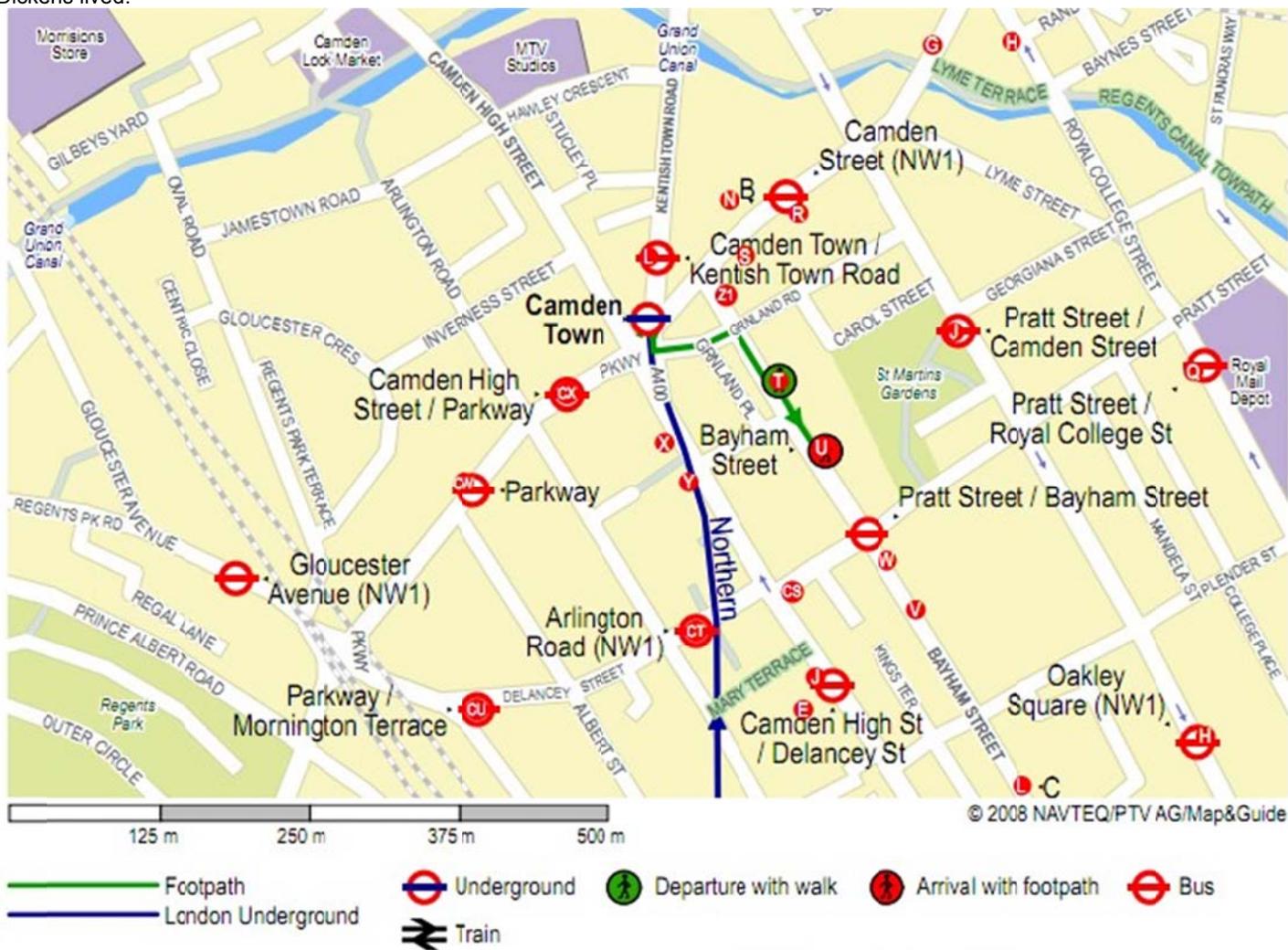
We mostly ignored the cameras and made our way down to the Victoria Line platform. We quickly boarded a train and headed north a couple of stations to Warren Street, where we transferred to the Northern Line. Here we got a taste of just how frequent service is on the London underground. I’m used to losing a lot of travel time with transfers, but that was definitely not the case in London. While it was a fair hike to the Northern Line platform, there was essentially no wait at all for a train. The Northern Line has a very complex service structure, with a single southern portion splitting into two branches in central London, re-joining north of downtown, and then splitting again to serve three main northern destinations (with many trains stopping short of the terminals). Warren Street is on the Charing Cross branch of the downtown split, yet the electronic signboard showing the ETAs of the next few trains showed we could expect a train about every two minutes—even at midday. Most of the line sees about one train a minute at rush hour. **[The tube surpasses even New York in its service frequency—which ALMOST makes it worth its excessive fare.]**

A train bound for High Barnet (hi-BARN-it) arrived just as we got to the platform, and we made our way aboard. London’s tube trains are smaller than most of their American counterparts, both narrower and with less headroom. Unlike rail cars here, the tops of London’s tube trains are curved to match the shape of the round tunnels. There’s just the tiniest bit of clearance between the underground cars and the tunnel walls. Most trains have seating along the sides, facing the aisle, the style they use on most of New York’s subway trains. This provides less seating, but more standing room, than the “transverse” (perpendicular to the walls) seating most other cities use. London’s train seats are carefully divided by wooden or plastic arm rests, which further reduce the number of people who can actually sit down. The seats themselves are covered with velour upholstery, with some of the most garish designs imaginable. Each line appears to have its own upholstery design. The Northern Line featured black and white pattern in a strange checkerboard that looked like one of those impossible designs by M.C. Escher. Sadly, that was one of the more attractive designs.

On most of London’s tube lines, an electronic female voice announces the stations and other information. While quite intelligible, the voice is **terribly** British. It is absolutely amazing to me just how different British and American pronunciation are. First of all, Brits almost always stress the beginnings of words, while Americans more often will stress the last or penultimate (next to last)

syllables of words. Americans will also put multiple stress in a word or phrase (like CHAIR-ing-CROSS), while Brits stress the beginning and then swallow the rest of the phrase. (CHAR-n-crs). Then there's the vowel sounds. Pretty much every English word seems to have different vowel sounds on the two sides of the Atlantic. Worse, though, there doesn't seem to be a lot of pattern as to what sound will be given to which vowel when. It caught me by surprise to hear British speech using very short vowel sounds (the "A" in "hat" or "pal" in American speech) in places Yanks would use more of an "ah" sound. I'd expected exactly the opposite to be true. A station we passed through frequently was called Balham. I figured the first syllable would be pronounced in Britain like "ball", but in fact the word is "BAL-m", with the first syllable rhyming with Cal Ripken's first name. Then there's any number of vowel sounds pronounced as if they had the German umlaut on them. Another station we passed through often was called Oval, where the Germanic "O" sound rendered a simple word almost unintelligible.

We took the train northward to Camden Town, a neighborhood just north of central London. Built as a slum in Victorian times, Camden Town today is one of the trendiest addresses in the city. We took the escalators upstairs and emerged on Camden High Street, the main business district of the area. Our goal was to find Charles Dickens' boyhood home, which was alluded to as the home of the Cratchits in *A Christmas Carol*. I knew the address for the old rowhouse, which is supposedly a historic landmark. Before the trip I had entered the address into Transport for London's online journey planner, which spit out a detailed map and step-by-step walking directions from the station to the historic landmark. The TfL map made the walk look simple enough (a couple of turns from the station), and the directions were quite explicit. Unfortunately, this would be one of many times we would find London a very difficult place to get around. In addition to having the short, rambling streets you'd expect in an ancient city, London is **very** poorly signed. Paris and Madrid have modern overhead street signs similar to what you'd see in an American city. Here, though, they seem to think you should know instinctively which street is which. Sometimes there will be a rusty old steel sign affixed to the side of a building with a street name on it, but just as often there is no sign at all. We wandered around Camden Town for quite a while, but except for Camden High Street, we never found any of the streets referred to on the Journey Planner or shown on its map. I ended up snapping a picture of a nursery school that was housed in a couple of adjacent rowhouses, which I could imagine was at least similar to the place the young Dickens lived.



Transport for London map (called up again for this revision) showing a deceptively simple route to Dickens home at 11 Bayham Street, Camden Town

Camden Town is a lively place. At its core are two big markets (Camden Market and The Market at Camden Locks) that seem to sell everything imaginable. The markets are mostly open on weekends, but during the “festive period” the stalls are open every day. We walked past both markets, and while didn’t buy a thing, it was fascinating to see all the different vendors hawking their wares. Most things seemed to have fixed prices, with some things seeming to be bargains (like £1 T-shirts) and others at ridiculous prices (£50 for a used portable TV).

In Camden Town, like in most of London, I was struck at how new this ancient city really is. With just a few exceptions the oldest buildings here date from Victorian times. Much of the city was destroyed in World War II, so there are also lots of very modern buildings. Camden Town combined 19<sup>th</sup> Century, postwar, and ultramodern architecture, and that was typical of most of the city. Even famous landmarks like Big Ben (actually St.



**Nursery school in the approximate location of Dickens’ home  
Camden Town, London**

Stephen’s Tower; Big Ben is the name of the bell that strikes the hour) and Tower Bridge are about 150 years old. While the narrow, winding streets give the place an old world feel, in fact most of the buildings in central Boston or Philadelphia are older than those in London. **[That’s true of Boston especially; much of Philly is actually reconstructed. Having since visited there, I’d likely add Providence to the list as well.]** What is old in London a handful of churches, though even many of these are actually postwar restorations in the style of ancient buildings. **[I got much more of a sense of history in small towns in the American Northeast (where the bulk of things are two centuries old) than in London. It really was hard to believe just how little of “jolly old England” was truly old.]**

The people in Camden Town are young and trendy. Streets here are lined with nightclubs and coffee bars, and well-scrubbed gel-haired people in fashionably tattered garments wander between music shops chatting on their “mobiles”, oblivious to everyone around them. They’re the same sort of people I’d seen in Hollywood and Greenwich Village or south of the Ramblas in Barcelona, though a bit more “punk” in appearance than in other places. Every city has its “hip” area, and in London Camden seems to have overtaken Soho as the place to party. **[As I’m writing this revision, I’m listening to an audiobook of Julie Andrews’ autobiography. The actress lived in Camden Town during World War II. At the time it was very much London’s low rent district, and Miss Andrews is amazed at how much it has changed in the intervening years.]** It’s not really a surprise that this is where MTV has its European headquarters.

Margaret and I didn’t dawdle here. Besides the fact that both of us were a bit old for such a happening scene, Margaret’s coat zipper didn’t work, and she was obviously getting quite chilly. After trying in vain to find the Dickens home, we retreated to the warmth and relative calm of the underground.

We took another branch of the Northern Line (“via Bank” as opposed to “via Charing Cross”) south to Old Street, a major interchange between the tube and national rail services located beneath a “roundabout” (ROON-duh-but, that is traffic circle) on the eastern boundary of the historic City of London. There are about a dozen different exits to this station, leading to every conceivable corner of the big interchange at ground level. Surprisingly, this enormous station provided much better orientation than Camden Town. We took the “way out” (British for “exit”, though the term “emergency exit” is also used in Britain) leading to the east side of southbound City Road and almost immediately reached our next destination.

Buried in a neighborhood of old warehouses turned to offices is City Road Chapel, essentially the “Mother Church” of Methodism. This boxy tan stone building was John Wesley’s parish church, and the rectory next door was the first Methodist parsonage. We both grew up Methodist, and Margaret was the wife of a Methodist minister, so it was quite interesting to see this historic church. Unfortunately all we could see was the exterior. There’s a museum on the history of Methodism inside, but it was closed between Christmas and New Year. The church itself is still an active Methodist parish, twinned on a circuit with another East London Methodist church. **[It appears looking at the denominational website that EVERY Methodist church in Britain is part of a circuit. This may be due at least in part to the fact that church attendance in Britain is extremely low; less than 10% of the British populace attends services on a given Sunday.]** They would be holding Watch Night services on New Year’s Eve, and we considered attending church as a way of seeing inside the place.

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**ABOVE: John Wesley's City Road Chapel**  
**BELOW: Bunhill Fields Burial Ground**



For now though we just looked around and snapped a few pictures through the gate. I should say I snapped a few pictures. Margaret's camera, which is far more advanced than mine, wasn't working. Apparently its battery (a strangely shaped one that is only available from camera dealers) was dead. I got as many pictures as I could, so I could share duplicate prints with my sister.

Across the street from City Road Chapel was a fascinating little cemetery. The cemetery has nothing to do with the church, and it isn't particularly historic (mostly dating from the mid-1800s and not the resting place of anyone I'd ever heard of), but it was still interesting to see. Basically it functions as a pleasant park in a very crowded neighborhood. The old tombstones and vaults add a decorative touch to the place.

We made our way back to Old Street station and walked past a couple of beggars to get to the ticket hall. We went south a couple of stations to Bank (beneath the Bank of England and the London Exchange), one of the busiest interchanges on the underground. Here we took a long escalator much deeper underground to a platform that serves the Docklands Light Railway. The DLR

runs east from Central London, mostly as an elevated line. It traverses the area that was in Victorian times the biggest port in the world. The docks were abandoned in the mid '60s when the world's shippers switched to containerized cargo and London's port moved to a new site about ten miles further down the Thames. Today the docklands are in various stages of urban renewal. The centerpiece is Canary Wharf, which is to London what Midtown is to Manhattan. Canary Wharf houses the tallest skyscraper in Europe (Canada Place, named after the docks that serviced ships to that dominion), as well as dozens of other towers of glass, steel, and marble. A lot of the rest of the Docklands area isn't quite so nice: abandoned warehouses, grimy factories, ratty housing projects ("council flats" in local lingo), and empty lots. We saw all of this ahead of this, but for today we wouldn't actually see any of it up close.

Instead we got off the light rail just short of the actual Docklands, at Shadwell station, which is just east of central London. We walked downstairs from the light rail station and a couple of blocks through a very pleasant neighborhood business district to the

Shadwell underground station. This is a heavily Asian area that struck me as very middle class. We didn't really do anything here, but it was fun to walk through the neighborhood.

From Shadwell we took the East London tube line south to Wapping and then under the Thames to Rotherhithe (RAW-ther-ut) station. The tunnel we passed through is actually the oldest underwater tunnel on earth. It was built before the American Civil War as a pedestrian tunnel and pioneered new engineering techniques that are still used for most tunneling today. From a train it looks like pretty much any other tunnel, but knowing the history, it was interesting to pass through.

Rotherhithe, a collection of brick rowhouses and duplexes on the south side of the Thames, would provide our next opportunity to get completely lost in London. Again I had printed out a the map and directions to our destination from the TfL website, and again the detailed map didn't seem to have much in common with the unlabeled streets in the neighborhood. The route to our destination was supposed to be quite short, but we wandered around for almost twenty minutes before finding it. There wasn't much happening in this almost exclusively residential neighborhood, but it was fun to see a lot of the homes decorated for the holidays.

Eventually we did find the truly quaint narrow street of stone and half-timbered buildings that we were looking for. Our destination in Rotherhithe was one of London's oldest buildings, and one with a lot of historical connection to America. It was a pub that has been in more or less continuous operation since the 1500s. Originally called the Shippe, it was later called the Spread Eagle and Crown. Since World War II it has been known as the Mayflower. The name is appropriate, because it was at this pub that the Pilgrims arranged passage to America on the ship of that name. (I always thought of Puritans as tea-totalers, but apparently the Pilgrims brewed beer and cider in Massachusetts.)

Our plan was to have a lunch of classic English "pub grub" at the Mayflower. I had checked out the pub's website (pretty much every business on the planet has a website these days), and it said they were open from 11:30am to midnight seven days a week. What the website neglected to say, but a handwritten sign on the door did, was that they were closed during the "festive season" between Christmas and New Year. I'd have loved to go inside and have lunch there, but instead I just snapped a few pictures of the outside.

Just about everything in London seemed to change its schedule during the holidays. Some (like the markets in Camden) were open when they should have been closed, but for most things it was the other way around. Several things we would have liked to see were closed for Festive Season, and others had reduced hours. This is the biggest school vacation of the year in Britain, a time lots of families go "on holiday". That's probably what was up with the owners of the Mayflower, but it was sort of annoying to expect it to be open and find it locked up.

It was quite chilly out today, and with her open coat Margaret had gotten more than a little cold as we wandered around Rotherhithe. That made it easy for us to decide to pay a visit to the district's one other tourist attraction, the Brunel Museum. Marc Brunel was the engineer who built the tunnel we had gone through on our way here. The museum is located in the brick engine house where he pumped out water that would accumulate in the tunnel. Admission was £2 each. I gave a £5 note to the proprietor's young daughter, who searched through an old fashioned cash box to find a £1 coin as change. Margaret and I then slowly made our way through the place, which presents a rather encyclopedic history of the tunnel and its construction. It was far from exciting (I saw a documentary on the same topic on the Discovery Channel once that was much more interesting), and I'd be willing to bet we were the only visitors they had today. I've certainly gone to duller attractions, though, and it did at least give us a chance to get out of the cold **[though I distinctly remember it being surprisingly chilly inside the museum]**.

We walked back to the Rotherhithe tube station, which really was just a short distance from the Mayflower—once we knew how the two related to each other. We took the East London line back through the Brunel tunnel and on north to the end of the line at Whitechapel. There we transferred to the above-ground Hammersmith & City Line, which we took to Moorgate station. We then got back on the Northern Line and rode it for about half an hour south.



**Mayflower Pub – Rotherhithe**

It was interesting to look at people as we traveled on the tube. I had read several accounts ahead of time that described London as “the most diverse city on earth”. While Margaret appeared to see more diversity than I did, from what I saw on the tube and wandering around neighborhoods, I find that description hard to believe. While there are people of many ethnic backgrounds here, compared to most American cities London came across to me as overwhelmingly white. (That’s neither a good nor a bad thing, just an observation.) Easily better than half (and probably more like three-fourths) of our fellow passengers on the tube were Caucasian, and whites seemed to be in the majority in almost every neighborhood I visited. I would rank New York (where Queens made exactly the same claim as London) and Toronto (which was where I had a sense of “We Are the World”) well ahead of London in diversity.

I’m not trying to say that London doesn’t have lots of ethnic groups; it does. On this trip we’d see people who could trace their origins to nearly every country on earth—including some rather unexpected places. From the point of view of a visitor, though, the mix of people here was a lot closer to Minneapolis than Los Angeles.

Part of the city’s claim is probably due to the fact that they seem to subdivide ethnic groups that in America we lump together. Margaret and I saw a number of government forms that asked people to identify their race. They have main categories like white, black, and Asian, but each of those is subdivided into separate groups. Whites, for instance, can be classified as British, Irish, or “other”—which is further broken down by exact country of origin. Blacks could be African, Caribbean, or “other”, and Asians can be Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or “other”. Strangely Chinese is its own category, separate from Asian. In addition to all these categories, they have even more categories of “mixed” ethnicity, combining every possible pair of the aforementioned groups. If you count all of those individually, London certainly would be diverse—though an awful lot of people would still list their background as “British”.

(I did some checking after we got back to America. It turns out that 74% of Londoners are white, about 60% of them British whites. Ten percent are south Asian, 5% Caribbean, and 5% African. London does have a higher percentage of non-white people than any other city in Europe, and it boasts immigrants representing 270 nationalities. The “ethnic” percentage is far smaller than almost any major American city, though.)

We went back to Bank station and continued southward to London Bridge and Borough (pronounced closer to “BAH-tuh” than to my last name [The first time I heard it I looked at a map, attempting to find a station called “Butter”.]). Next up was the amusingly named Elephant and Castle Station, and then Kennington, where the two downtown branches re-joined. South of there were Oval and Stockwell, then three close-together stations in the neighborhood called Clapham (CLAP’m). After that was Balham, then Tooting Bec (supposedly named after Thomas a Becket) and Tooting Broadway. Two of these stations had extra-short platforms. At these the recorded voice advised departing passengers to move toward the center of the train. This was always amusing, because the voice said “toward” with two full syllables “TOE-warr’d”—an unusual case of a British pronunciation actually taking longer to say than its American equivalent.

Finally we reached our destination, Colliers Wood (the first word pronounced quickly but distinctly as “COLE-ee-yuhs”), two stops from the southern end of the line. We ascended the escalator and emerged in the heart of Colliers Wood High Street. After all



**Colliers Wood High Street (tube station at center) – London, England**

the trouble we’d had locating other things, I was delighted to see that the hotel we’d be staying in was visible from the station, kitty-corner across the street. The neighborhood that would be our home for the next four days was fascinating. Settled in prehistoric times, Colliers Wood is centered on what was originally called Stane Street, the Roman Road from London south to the coast. In the days when pilgrims made pilgrimages to Canterbury, this was often the overnight stop on the first night out of London. The place was the home of Metron Priory, the last place other than Westminster Abbey where an English monarch was crowned. The priory was closed and destroyed by Henry VIII, and later charcoal burners from which the district gets its name were erected. (The burners are also long gone; today the site of Merton Priory is home to several “retail parks” or shopping centers.) Colliers Wood’s most famous resident in

history was Admiral Nelson of Trafalgar fame. Supposedly its wealthiest resident today is John Deacon from the rock group Queen. While Deacon has owned a rowhouse here for almost thirty years, calling him a “resident” is stretching it. The retired bass player (who is supposedly worth over \$50 million) spends most of his time on a farm in the English Midlands. **[Apparently the information in this paragraph is wrong. Deacon’s actual home is in Putney, a bit to the northwest of Colliers Wood.]**

Modern Colliers Wood mostly dates to the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when the ancient village became a “purpose-built” suburb. The majority of the area is made up of short strings of brick rowhouses built on quaintly named cul de sacs. Old Stane Street became High Street, which today is lined with quaint brick buildings that house chains found in virtually every neighborhood of London. Most amusing among these was the establishment right next door to the station. Called “Ladbroke”, it is probably named after the founder of the chain. The name becomes a pun though, when you realize that this is a chain of betting parlors; the lads who go there most likely do come home broke. **[I just looked up Ladbroke’s on Wikipedia. The founders were named Schwind, Pendelton, and Bendir. The name apparently comes from a racetrack somewhere north of London. Surprisingly, the chain was at the time owned by Hilton. It has since been divested from the hotel business. They have 2,400 betting parlors in the U.K., Ireland, Belgium, and Spain, and they are also the largest online gambling service in the world.]**



**The Tower, Colliers Wood**

Buckinghamshire. This particular hotel, which took its name from the famous tennis venue that is vaguely nearby **[I’ve stayed at a number of hotels that really aren’t that near to their namesakes.]**, served our needs perfectly. At £53.25 (a little over \$90) per night, it was just about the cheapest place in London that I could book online. (The only cheaper places with in-room baths were part of the Ibis chain, and Margaret had unpleasant experiences at an Ibis hotel she stayed at in France a few years back.) It was also just steps from the tube station and in a pleasant neighborhood just half an hour from downtown. The hotel provided an excellent breakfast, and for the most part the room was adequate for our needs.

The Express by Holiday Inn—Wimbledon was not, as the Brits would say, a “purpose-built” hotel. The building appears to date from the ‘60s or ‘70s, and I have no clue what it was originally built to be. That it wasn’t built to be a modern hotel is given away from the oddly sized and shaped rooms and the fact that huge support pillars obstruct all the hallways, making negotiating luggage down the halls an interesting experience. On the outside the place doesn’t look much like an American-style hotel. The three-floor building features yellow-painted cement blocks on its front side with red brick in back. A tiny “car park” sits beneath an extension of the upper floors at the south end of the building. There are about a hundred rooms in the place, but parking space for not much more than a dozen cars. (By the way, they charge £5 or \$8.75 a night for that parking.)

We made our way up the brick steps in front of the hotel, past their tiny meeting room (a table and about ten chairs that were set for a meeting, but never seemed to actually be used), and through the front door. The huge main lobby was divided into a breakfast area, a bar, a vending area (selling mostly cigarettes and booze through vending machines), a small sitting area, and the reception desk. The whole place was furnished with blond wood and was decorated in a shade of deep blue you’d never find in nature. It was an unusual color scheme, but really quite attractive. The pleasant surroundings were almost enough to keep me from noticing there were at least five different security cameras in the lobby.

There is one other feature of Colliers Wood that seems as if it should be the winner in “Which of these things doesn’t belong?” Set among rowhouses, the “high street” shops, and the strip malls is a place known only as “The Tower”. Built around 1970, the brown monolith today is a mostly empty office building. It’s about ten times as high as anything else in the area, and it definitely stands out like a sore thumb. One description I found calls the big box it “the ugliest building in England”. I wouldn’t go that far, but it’s certainly not the best feature of the neighborhood.

Colliers Wood station itself is housed in a grand cement building that looks like an American WPA project (though it actually is slightly older than that era **[The 1926 structure is listed as a national landmark.]**). There’s a pedestrian crossing right in front where we crossed to the west side of High Street. Just to the north was a “mini-cab” (privately owned taxi service) stand and a Tesco convenience store that sold Esso gas at 88p per litre (almost exactly \$6/gallon—makes the \$3 we paid last summer seem cheap). We turned south and walked past the Colliers Tup, a pleasant-looking pub that I found out after we got back is part of a chain. (“Tup” appears to have a branch in pretty much every neighborhood in Britain.) We walked just past there and reached our ultimate destination, the Express by Holiday Inn—Wimbledon.

Holiday Inn is British owned and is by far the biggest lodging chain in London. This was the third Express by Holiday Inn I had booked (changing twice due to problems with transportation to the other locations), and I could have chosen from dozens of others—not to mention all the “real” Holiday Inns or the Crown Plaza hotels. The chain has over 100 locations just in Greater London, with many more in nearby parts of Surrey, Essex, Kent, and

I had booked this hotel at a prepaid rate, meaning my credit card had (at least in theory) been debited between the time of booking and my arrival here. I was a little worried about that, because I've had problems with similar bookings in the past. This time, though, there was no problem at all. I went up to reception and said they should have a room booked in my name. The clerk punched a few keys and said yes. He didn't ask for identification, a credit card, or anything—just how many keys I wanted. I said “two”, and he gave me the programmed cards and pointed to the “lift” (the elevator). I don't think I've ever had such a quick and easy check-in at any hotel.

We took the lift up to the floor numbered “2” (what Americans would call the third floor, two levels above the entry level. The electronic lock responded very slowly to my key, but eventually it unlocked. I opened the door to reveal a tiny, but reasonably pleasant room. Again decorated in deep blue, the room featured two single beds (something no American hotel would ever have, but a fairly standard set-up in Europe), each with a tiny ledge beside it. At the far end of the room a small triangular table was built into the wall, with a single chair in front of it. The table turned into a ledge that housed a “teamaker”, an oversized plastic hot pot (1.7 litre capacity) that boiled water that could be used for tea or instant coffee. Facing the



**Our room at the Express by Holiday Inn—Wimbledon South**

beds was a small stand that held a fairly large television. Beside that was a ledge with shelves built into its bottom. **[The picture above gives some idea as to just how compact this room was—very close to the smallest room I've ever stayed in. The beds are twin-sized rather than doubles, and the space at the foot is barely wide enough for a person to pass.]**

Near the door was the bathroom—small, but larger than many I've seen at hotels **[definitely out of proportion to the rest of the room]**. This was definitely not the highlight of the room. The sink was built into a small counter that also hid the toilet tank. An enormous handle on the front of that counter flushed the large, boxy toilet. The sink itself was small and oval, with a drain that we thought was permanently almost closed until someone fixed it into the right position the last day of our stay. There was also a “power shower<sup>®</sup>”, a registered trademark that was a definitely a lie. The oversized showerhead barely seemed to drip, and its complicated control made it anybody's guess at just what temperature the water would come out. The shower was covered by a thin cloth curtain that barely touched the bottom, ensuring that each time we showered we'd flood the bathroom floor in the process. It reminded me quite a lot of some of the “luxury” hotel rooms where Paul and I had stayed in Russia.

The bathroom's quirks were more amusing than problematic. What was a problem was that the room was **cold**, not just chilly but downright frigid. A sign in front of the hotel bragged that their rooms were “comfort cooled”, and they seemed to be keeping true to their word—in winter. What made things so cold was that the only heat in the room was a small electric radiator on the wall that separated the bedroom from the bath. Being electric, it only ran when the power in the room was on (and a variety of switches were set in specific positions). To turn the electricity on, a room key had to be inserted in a receptacle by the door. Since no one had been in the room for at least a day (and I'd bet more like a week), there had been no heat in there during some of the coldest days of the year. We quickly turned the radiator, dumped our things, and headed out to explore warmer parts of the neighborhood.

We walked south from the hotel past another pub, a Carphone Warehouse (another chain you'll find in every neighborhood of London) **[apparently Europe's largest cellphone dealer, they own a 50% interest in the Best Buy chain]**, and a Burger King. Just south of there was a place that appears as “superstore” on maps and that road signs refer to as a “hypermarket”. Formerly called Savacentre (a name that still appears on some of the store's signage), this colossal edifice is now part Sainsbury's, one of the biggest grocery and department store chains in Britain. When it was built in the late '70s, this was the largest store of its kind in Europe. They're presently enlarging it even more, and right now the place looks like one big construction project.

A big sign on the side of the construction directed us we could head to “SUPERSTORE BY LIFT” or “SUPERSTORE BY TRAVELATOR”. We chose “travelator”, the British word for moving walkway. Actually what lead up from the car park to the store itself was an actual escalator. The down trip did have a gradually sloped moving walkway that could accommodate shopping carts. We made our way past the security buzzers and entered a store that was much like the Super-Target you'd find in any American suburb. It

combined a huge supermarket with aisle after aisle of fairly upscale clothing, furniture, electronics, and other dry goods. We spent quite a while browsing through the store, mostly being shocked at the ridiculous prices this “discount” chain charged. **[The former Savacentre building has apparently since been subdivided. Sainsbury’s is still a hypermarket, but has downsized so it now occupies only the lower floor. The upper floor now houses M&S, the hypermarket division of Marks and Spencer, one of Sainsbury’s main competitors. It certainly seems strange to have competing chains literally adjacent to each other, but I suppose it’s not all that different from what happens in any mall.]**

I bought some snack foods (most with fairly reasonable prices), some envelopes of “Maltease” cocoa mix, and a two litre bottle of Pepsi (£1.19, or \$2.08) to add to my collection. I also bought a box of Christmas crackers, those wrapped up tubes of festive fun that have been a British holiday tradition since Victorian times. We had snapped some crackers at Steve’s with the family, but these were cheap and seemed fun. The box I bought contained eight crackers, and each night we were here Margaret and I would pull the gunpowder-coated tabs and snap open one each. It definitely added to our Christmas cheer.

We made our way to one of the long array of checkstands at the front of the store (I think there were more than thirty), where a young black woman asked if we had a “Nectar card” we might have used for some savings. We didn’t, so of course we paid full price for all our purchases.

While this was by far the largest location we saw, Sainsbury’s is another chain that seemed to have a location pretty much everywhere in London. I’m sure we saw at least twenty on this trip. Supposedly Sainsbury’s is the #3 “hypermarket” chain in Britain. The other two are Tesco, which sells dry goods in stores called “Extra” and a chain called ASDA that is Wal-Mart’s biggest overseas division **[actually its Mexican operations are larger]**. (It’s interesting that they don’t choose to use the Wal-Mart name in Britain.) Extra and ASDA may do more business, but I’m positive Sainsbury’s has to have more locations than either of the others. I saw a few Extra and ASDA stores, but Sainsbury’s was literally everywhere.

We took the travelator down, crossed the car park (which is basically the bottom floor of the store), and made our way back past Burger King and Carphone Warehouse to the hotel. I started munching on a bag of snacks (rather disgusting Malaysian chutney flavored potato chips) and flipped on the “tele”. The choices included BBC1, BBC2, and ITV (Britain’s three main TV networks), Sky TV (a satellite news channel owned by the same company that owns Fox), and two sports channels. There were also three channels that broadcast radio while (or perhaps I should say “whilst”, a word that sounds hopelessly archaic to Americans but is part of everyday speech in England) showing a text crawl advertising various hotel services. Then there were channels 16 and 17 (obviously several channels were missing), which were reserved for adult movies. I was afraid when we first happened on these that I would be billed for just flipping through them (a problem I once had at a hotel in Chicago that took quite a while to resolve), but figured that wouldn’t happen when I realized that each time I did accidentally flip the channels too high I’d see the exact same “teasers”. One featured a couple in bed, the other a couple in the shower. Both showed a lot of skin and—how to say this—“motion”. Neither actually showed anything you could call “hard core”, though, and those exact same teasers just seemed to repeat on the two channels in endless loops. I didn’t get billed for viewing the teasers, and I have no idea how I would have ordered the actual movies.

After flipping through the channels I watched the offerings on the two sports channels, both of which were things you’d never see in America. One was showing darts. That’s right, fat middle-aged men were throwing darts in a pub, and it was being covered on the equivalent of ESPN with commentators that sounded like they were announcing a golf match. The other sports channel was showing women’s lawn bowling, a “sport” I’m not sure I even knew existed. An Australian national team beat South Africa in that one, by the way. Later on the same channel showed an American football game, so I guess anything goes on British TV.

I really hadn’t eaten anything substantial at all today, and the chutney chips were less than satisfying. I had figured we might go out to a fairly nice restaurant tonight, but Margaret was tired and not feeling well and obviously wasn’t up to going out. I decided I’d head over to Burger King and asked Margaret if she’d like me to pick anything up. She groggily said a milkshake would be nice, and I headed out.

I first went back to Sainsbury’s, where I did a bit of shopping on my own. I used the better part of John and Janet’s Christmas gift to get a pin-striped dress shirt and a coordinating long-sleeved T-shirt. Both were being clearanced after Christmas; they were affordable now, but I wouldn’t have even looked at them at full price. I found it interesting that neither had any country of origin label, something I guess isn’t necessary in the E.U. I’m sure they weren’t made in England, but they made nice souvenirs of the place nonetheless. **[The striped shirt remains a favorite of mine, though I rarely wear it. I sort of keep it as “special”.]**

I also picked up an orange Sainsbury’s “bag for life”. These are thick plastic shopping bags with handles that hold a lot of weight. Aldi sells similar bags in America for 25¢. They cost 75p (\$1.30) at Sainsbury’s, but you can re-use them as much as you like, and if the bag ever breaks they’ll replace it free. I didn’t come back to Sainsbury’s, but I did use their bag to tote stuff all over London. I’d seen lots of people doing just that in our travels today, and it seemed like a perfect way to blend in with the locals. **[I almost always carry my stuff in some sort of shopping bag when I travel, and I often try to pick up something that is typical of the place. The Sainsbury’s bag served the purpose in London that bags from Walgreen’s have in many American cities.]**

The Colliers Wood Burger King was certainly interesting. In fact, it’s just about the strangest fast food place I’ve ever been to. The place is designed primarily to be a drive-thru; indeed the drive-thru completely encircles the building. There’s no parking lot at all (though people could park at Sainsbury’s or Carphone Warehouse), and it’s rather difficult for pedestrians to get inside the place. Inside the little orange brick box there’s almost nothing that isn’t plastic. It’s so tacky it would make most American Burger Kings look beautiful. It would also make any American Burger King seem cheap. Everything here was expensive, with nothing on the menu under

a pound, sandwiches costing as much as £3 (\$5.25), and value meals up to £5.75 (\$10). **[American fast food prices have skyrocketed in recent years. A \$5.25 burger wouldn't be unheard of now, though I've yet to see a \$10 value meal in this country.]** There is a discount for take-away orders (which apparently aren't subject to as high a rate of VAT), but even subtracting 10%, it's still expensive.

After scanning the menu I ordered a small vanilla milkshake (£1.25, or \$2.20) for Margaret and a chicken salad (£3.25, or \$5.70) for me. The clerk (who was white, but from some other country) didn't really speak English, so ordering was a bit of a challenge. "Small" didn't seem to be a word she understood (apparently I actually got a "regular" shake), so she had me point to the glass I wanted. Then it came time to choose a dressing (or "salad cream" as the Brits would say). She just brought out one of every flavor they had (seven choices, I think). I assumed I was supposed to pick one, so I chose honey mustard and put the others aside.

The salad was amusing. I got a small pre-packaged bowl of mixed greens with some deep-fried chicken nuggets thrown on top of it. I'm not sure if it was Britain or Burger King that turned what I thought might be a healthy dinner into little more than salty fat. **[That would be Britain. I've had the equivalent salad in the States, and it comes with grilled chicken strips.]**

Margaret was sleeping when I got back to the hotel, and I thought it wise not to disturb her. I set the shake beside her, and she sipped on it occasionally as she tossed and turned through the evening. I wrote notes for this travelogue and read some more in the garbage book. Even so, I called an early end to the night.

## Thursday, December 29, 2005

I was wide awake at 2:00 this morning, literally shivering in bed. While the radiator was operating, without any fan to move the heat across the room, it mostly concentrated near Margaret's bed. (She complained that she was too hot while sleeping. **[Margaret almost always finds hotel rooms too hot. We'd have been wise on this trip to have changed beds, with her closer to the window.]**) I realized later that I had made one crucial mistake in setting the various switches that would turn the radiator on. It was on, but so was the air conditioner. The room was trying to heat and cool itself at the same time. On my side of the room it was cooling that won out, and I was very cold indeed. It wasn't as easy to compensate for a cold room here as it would be at most hotels, either. Even the cheapest American hotels have beds covered with a top sheet, a blanket, and a bedspread. You can use the bedspread as an additional blanket, and its length allows you to tuck it in around you if you have to. Here, though, we didn't have that option. Instead of a bedspread there were two little strips of blue velour that served no purpose other than decoration. (I rolled them up to supplement my flimsy pillow, but they certainly provided no warmth.) There wasn't really a blanket either. Instead each bed had a "duvet", a strange combination of a thin comforter hidden inside a sheet. The whole thing was neither wider nor longer than the single bed, making it all but impossible to cover my whole body with it.

**[This was the first real experience I've had with duvets, which have since spread like a cancer throughout the hotel world. Indeed these days it's hard to find a hotel that doesn't use the things. In American hotels, though, even if the duvet just barely fits the bed, its queen or king size will still be much larger than my body, so I can double it over or bundle inside it like a sleeping bag if necessary. On a twin bed, though, that wasn't an option.]**

While 2am was about six hours after I had retired (the amount of sleep I get many nights), it was not exactly a practical time to get up. Margaret was clearly asleep, and I didn't want to wake her by turning on the light and reading. I tossed and turned and didn't really sleep well at all after that.

That said, it was all of 9am when Margaret and I actually got up this morning. It was easy to stay in bed that late, given that sunrise isn't until 9:00 in this very northerly city. We had a quick drip in the "power shower" and then made our way down to the lobby for breakfast. The abundance of Express by Holiday Inn's breakfast almost made up for their lack of heat. In America Holiday Inn Express has an outstanding breakfast, but their British cousins may do even better. While there was no hot food, you could have anything cold you could possibly want for breakfast. They had assorted breads, rolls, and pastries with which you could assemble the classic "continental breakfast", but that was just the beginning. There was also yogurt (spelled "yoghurt" in Britain) in various flavors, assorted fruits (apples, oranges, individual grapefruit sections, sliced pears, and fruit cocktail), and single-serving packages of a wide variety of cereals. They also had a machine that dispensed microscopic glasses of watered-down apple or orange juice and a hot beverage machine that would make dozens of variations on instant coffee, tea, cappuccino, and cocoa. **[I've since encountered similar machines at hotels in the American East, most recently at a Clarion hotel in Queens, New York.]**

A word is in order here on British coffee. For no reason I can figure out, British people seem to really like instant coffee. What to me is an inferior item that I can occasionally tolerate for its convenience is what most Brits mean when they say the word "coffee". Many restaurants had the same hot beverage machine as the breakfast bar at Express by Holiday Inn, and they actually seemed to think that was a good thing. Espresso is also available, but to me that's a different beverage from just plain coffee. I found regular coffee was available at two places. There are a few Starbucks and similar coffee bars scattered around London, though I didn't really feel like parting with the £2.50 (\$4.40) they wanted for a cup of joe. The only place that seemed to have real coffee at a vaguely reasonable price was McDonalds, where a cup cost £1.10 (\$1.90). Unfortunately I wouldn't find a McD's until later, so for now I'd have to put up with weak instant.

The breakfast area was very crowded, with about two dozen tables crammed into a rather small room. Also taking up space was a large, but scraggly Christmas tree with homely decorations. We wanted to snap a picture of this **extremely** British tree, but the room was never empty enough to allow us to do so.



**London Eye**

Margaret was still without a camera, and she noticed a Kodak stand selling disposable cameras for £9 (\$15.75) in the plaza by the eye. She bought two of them and then on a whim asked the attendant if he happened to have a battery that would fit her camera. He did indeed, so now she had both the disposable cameras and a real camera that would work.

The queue for the Eye was about a ten-minute wait. While business was steady, this line was obviously much shorter than what they sometimes have. There were tape mazes that could hold a queue four or five times as long as what we encountered this morning. Two young black men directed people to the part of the maze that was actually in use. We made our way through it, and three young white men inspected bags and patted people down before we could enter the support structure for the eye itself. We filed around another switchback and then reached the actual boarding area. The eye mostly doesn't stop; it just rotates very slowly. When one of the capsules comes down to ground level, the attendants usher twenty to thirty people aboard it. You have to board quickly, and it's a little awkward, since you're going from a stable platform onto a moving vehicle. We made it, though, and before long our "flight" had begun.

The Eye was built by British Airways (though it's currently in the process of being acquired by the company that owns Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum). They call rides on the Eye "flights", and they make announcements on "take-off" and "landing" similar to what you'd hear on an airplane. Each flight lasts about half an hour, and in the process you get a pretty good view of central London. I snapped pictures in every direction, though I think the curved glass in the capsule will probably distort them badly. I must say the ride was fun. It probably wasn't worth its cost (I forget the exact pound price, but around \$20), but I'm glad I did it.

After the Eye flight we made our way down Waterloo Pier to the boarding area for our cruise. It wasn't entirely clear which of the many docks we were supposed to leave from, but before long a boat (the Silver Bonito) arrived bedecked with advertising for the London Eye. That cleared things up a bit. We waited for them to get things arranged on board and then made our way onto the ship, together with maybe fifty of sixty other passengers. The boat could easily seat four times that number, an indication that this was definitely low season for river cruises.

The boat was decked out for Christmas, and as a holiday bonus our admission (again somewhere around \$20) included a complimentary glass (supposedly a £2 value) of either mulled wine or apple juice (non-alcoholic, unlike "cider" which is always hard in Britain). A young woman narrated the cruise, explaining everything we saw and filling dull moments with reasonably interesting remarks. I can't say she said anything terribly memorable, but I've had far worse guides. I'm glad we did this cruise, because it was an easy way to see all those "must see" landmarks in London. In one quick trip we saw Big Ben, the Tower of London, Parliament, St. Paul's Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, and the reconstruction of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. We also saw just about every bridge and railway station in London, as well as numerous lesser points of interest along the Thames. While these aren't all that far apart, it would still take quite a bit of time to see them all on foot. Moreover, in many cases the best view of them comes from the river. London is most definitely not a beautiful city, but it does have a lot of buildings and structures that are individually quite nice. On the cruise we got a good overview of most of them.

After breakfast we took the tube northward to Waterloo (WATT-uh-loo), an enormous rail terminal a little ways south of downtown London. We walked across an open-air skywalk in the middle of the Shell Oil headquarters and then down some awkward metal stairs to emerge in a little park on the south bank of the Thames. Our destination was the London Eye, the enormous wheel erected beside the river for the millennium celebration a few years back. Very similar to "big wheel" that Ferris erected in Chicago more than a century ago, the enormous Eye transports visitors in glass-walled capsules the size of a small rail car. It really dominates the skyline of central London, soaring higher than the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey across the river.

I had booked tickets for the Eye months ago online. The directions for claiming those tickets said to go to the machines in Borough Hall, just west of the eye. The machines were well hidden, but a clerk showed me where they were. To get my ticket I inserted my credit card in a reader, confirmed that I was me (pressing "yes" on a touch screen), and waited for five slips of paper to be printed. First to come out was a receipt. Next came two tickets for the eye, and finally I received two tickets for a Thames river cruise I had booked for a combination fare. Each ticket was mostly a barcode, which would be scanned to grant us entry to the attractions.

The tickets were timed, allowing entry within a half-hour window. There was still about fifteen minutes before the start of our admission, so we made a quick visit to the gift shop, where each of us picked up a paperback guide (£3 or \$5.25) showing everything we'd be seeing.

The only real problem with the cruise is that it was more than a bit nippy out on the water. The weather continued to be very cold, and for the return trip we joined the majority of the passengers in enclosed deck downstairs. We couldn't see nearly as well, but it was much warmer.

After the cruise we tried to find our way back to Waterloo station. As seemed to be a theme on this trip, we somehow made a wrong turn and ended up taking the longest possible route, getting a thorough tour of London's South Bank in the process.

The other touristy thing for which I had booked admission was Madame Tussaud's. While the timed tickets were for late this afternoon, I figured it would be wise to avoid a line and collect them ahead of time. I had left my TfL direction sheet on how to get to the place back at the hotel, but I thought I remembered how to get there. The address of Mme. T's is on Marleybone Street (a name that makes me think of the beginning of *A Christmas Carol*, though apparently it's pronounced closer to MALL-bun), so I suggested we take the Bakerloo Line to Marleybone. We did, and we surfaced in another mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century brick neighborhood with its own locations of Carphone Warehouse, Tesco, Sainsbury's, and Express by Holiday Inn. While nothing looked particularly hopeful from a tourist's point of view, this time my instincts on where things should be were actually right. We walked from the station to the nearest major street, which was Maryelbone. Way off in the distance we saw a strange looking domed building, which seemed promising to be the museum. We walked about half a mile down a busy street to get there. The place was in fact Madame Tussaud's. Annoyingly, though, the museum is virtually next door to a different station (Baker Street) that would have saved us the walk.



**David Burrow on the Thames, with Parliament and Big Ben in the background**



**Tower of London with "The Gerkin" building behind it**

valid, so we decided to see one of London's lesser-known sights. We took the Circle Line (many parts of which are in open cuts, rather than truly underground) east to Tower Hill station. We snapped a few pictures of the Tower of London as we walked past. (It would have been interesting to see inside, but it was another thing that was closed during the festive period.) We then went up the escalators to the Tower Gateway DLR station. We took the automated light rail train east a couple stops to Limehouse and then caught a second DLR train eastward. We passed Canary Wharf and were soon into the real docklands, the area that is still awaiting most of its urban renewal.

Before long we passed Canning Town, which was near one of the hotels I had booked and then cancelled. TfL had planned to close Canning Town station over the holidays (part of the Jubilee Line renovation project), so it would have been difficult to get to this

There were several ticket lines for Mme. T's, each for a different kind of ticket. Eventually I found the one for timed admissions and made my way to the front. I had carefully brought the confirmation number and my credit card, but all the man there cared about was my name. He printed out a couple of tickets, I snuck back under the rope cordoning off the line, and we were on our way again.

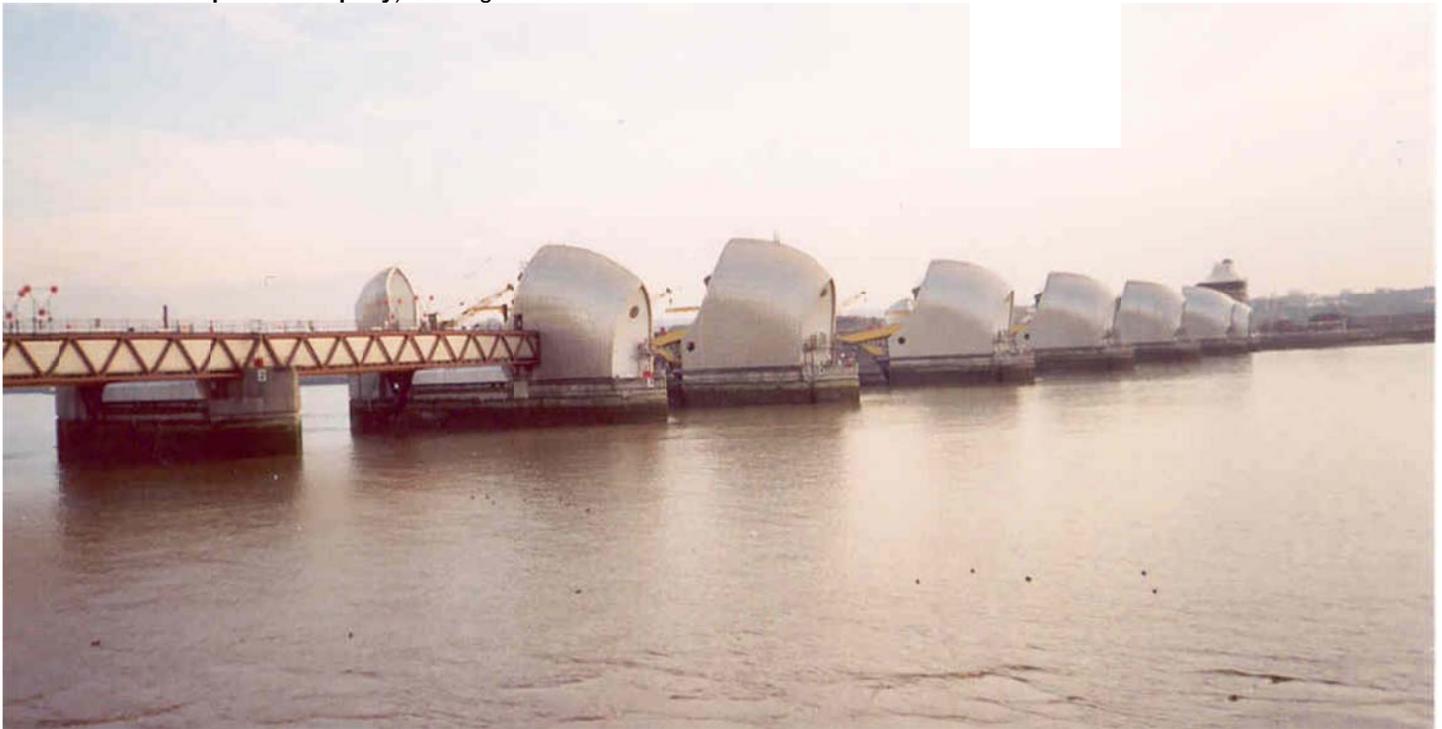
We had a couple of hours before our wax museum tickets would be

hotel. As it turned out they decided not to close the station after all, but I'm glad we switched reservations. Colliers Wood was a much nicer neighborhood than Canning Town.

Canning Town was built in Victorian times to house dock workers and support highly polluting heavy industry that was banned in London proper. Charles Dickens wrote a scathing essay on it. The pleasant scene he described featured shacks overlooking canals that festered with human waste with chimneys that belched acrid smoke. Those canals are still there, but today I'd guess they're polluted with runoff from refineries rather than "night soil". The smokestacks no longer pollute, since the factories they are attached to long ago fell idle. Still, the place is far from pleasant. Canning Town (and indeed almost all of the Borough of Newham) was almost entirely destroyed in the Blitz of World War II, and it was rebuilt mostly in the form of cheap apartment towers. The place looks remarkably like the outskirts of Moscow, with its neighborhoods of "Stalin towers". The gray concrete block Express by Holiday Inn we might have stayed at fits well with this grim neighborhood.

Newham ("NEW'm", a place formed by the amalgamation of East Ham and West Ham) will be the primary home to the 2012 Olympics. **[It's strange to think that this event, which was in the distant future when we visited, will be next summer.]** There are still signs all over the area urging people to "Back the Bid" and highlighting all the wonderful changes the games are supposed to bring to the area. It would be interesting to come back here seven years from now to how much of it came to pass. **[I gather a lot of plans were scaled back due to the global economic crisis. Several planned venues were cancelled, and the events are being diverted to already existing facilities.]**

We continued past Canning Town on a new section of the Docklands Light Railway that just opened up two weeks before our arrival. This section is intended mostly to serve London City Airport, a small field with easy connections all over Europe. We didn't go as far as the airport, and mostly saw the crumbling industrial waterfront of Silvertown and the hideously ugly Millennium Dome (closed in 2001 and not scheduled to reopen until the 2012 Olympics **[it actually has since become a concert venue called the O<sub>2</sub> arena, named after a cell phone company]**) looming across the river.



**Thames Flood Barrier**

Beyond Silvertown were a couple of brand new luxury highrises separated by our ultimate destination, Thames Barrier Park. This lovely little greenspace occupies the north side of one of England's greatest engineering projects, the Thames Flood Barrier. This enormous stainless steel expanse is designed to block the surge from the North Sea to keep London from flooding during major storms. Most of the time (including today) its gates are open, allowing river water to flow freely to the sea and ships to come up to London. In severe weather, though, they can shut the gates to keep low-lying London safe from the waves. This is precisely what the U.S. should have built years ago at the mouth of Lake Ponchartrain by New Orleans. If such a barrier existed the storm surge from Katrina wouldn't have made it into the lake from the Gulf of Mexico. Then the lake wouldn't have put such severe strain on the levees, and disaster would likely have been averted. Pioneered by Holland, barriers like this apparently exist all over Europe. Our government felt building one would be too expensive, a decision that obviously turned out to be "penny wise and pound foolish". **[In fairness I should point out that a barrier for Lake Pontchartrain would need to be both higher and MUCH wider. I-10 crosses the mouth of the lake on a seven-mile bridge, while the Thames is less than half a mile wide in east London.]**

There's really not much to see at the Thames Barrier. On the south side of the river they supposedly have a visitor's center. Unfortunately that's not presently very accessible by public transit. (In five more years this branch of the DLR will be extended across

the river, making it much more accessible. **[Surprisingly, the extension to Woolrich Arsenal on the south bank of the Thames opened in 2009, a year ahead of schedule.]** Margaret and I got a few pictures of the engineering marvel and had a pleasant walk through the park. Then we made our way back to Pontoon Dock station.

The station by the Thames Barrier is elevated high above an expressway. You can access the platforms either by elevator or by rather endless flights of stairs. **[Unlike the main tube lines, most DLR stations don't have escalators.]** When we got there a man was standing by the "lift" waiting for it to arrive, but something was obviously malfunctioning. The man apparently had some sons who had raced up the stairs ahead of him. He was sure his sons had screwed with the elevator and was irate. I actually think the boys were innocent, and the elevator was just not working. They certainly heard a blue streak from their dad, though.

Swearing in public seems to be more tolerated in Britain than in America. This man threw out the "F" word repeatedly, which is just not something I expected to hear in a public transit station. I heard it in other public places (like stores and on the street) too, and the blue language was certainly not confined to a single word. Even women seemed to think nothing of using vulgar speech in public places. **[Public profanity is becoming more common in America, but it's still nowhere near as bad as in Britain.]**



**Tower Bridge**

**[This, like several pictures in this travelogue was taken on the river cruise described earlier. It, like several pictures, was inserted at a random place in the travelogue, rather than at the appropriate chronological place.]**

We huffed and puffed our way up the stairs and managed to just make a train headed west. DLR trains are less frequent than those on the tube **[though the ten-minute intervals are as good as most transit systems in America]**, so this really was good fortune. We took the train west to Bank, where the line terminates deep underground. We went up and up and up some more to the still underground Circle Line platform. We had a short wait on the platform, and we happened to be waiting next to a candy machine—one of hundreds of such machines that line the platforms in the tube. The machine had a very strange coin mechanism. I placed a pound coin on its side in a holder and then shoved the holder into the machine. After that I was supposed to make my selection on an electronic keypad. However, when I tried to enter the selection, nothing happened. I pressed the coin return button, but again nothing happened. Later on at a different station Margaret also tried to use a candy machine and had the exact same experience. I guess TfL must supplement their budget with one pound coins from unwary tourists.

We completed the rest of the Circle Line's ring, making our way back to Baker Street. We walked past a string of souvenir stands and up to the entry of Madame Tussaud (which, by the way, is pronounced in bad French with the final "D" sounded: TOO-sewed). There was a longer line than there had been when I got the tickets, but when I flashed the tickets, the guard ushered us to the front. Another attendant told us to cut past several people who were waiting at the entry and go directly upstairs to the entrance. We did so, and before long we were in the attraction itself.

While it is severely overpriced (around \$30 for a late afternoon admission, and over \$50 earlier in the day), it was interesting to see Madame Tussaud's. I'd never been to a wax museum of any sort before, and I figured I might as well see the original. The artwork on the wax replicas of celebrities and historical figures was really quite good. There were, however, two problems with the place. First was the crowd. Rarely have I been anywhere with such a mob of people. Every room of the place was absolutely packed, to the point that it was difficult to see many of the sculptures. The other problem was labeling. Some of the wax figures were identified, but there were many others where they seemed to think we should just know who the people were. That wasn't hard to do with people like the royal family, but I'm not really up on all the current celebrities—particularly those who are little known outside of Britain. They could have improved things greatly by having consistent labeling on all the exhibits.

The most interesting part of Madame Tussaud's was an exhibit called the Spirit of London that amounted to an amusement park ride. After queuing for about ten minutes we got into mock-ups of those famous black cabs, which whisked us around a track as narration and animated wax figures gave a brief history of the city. If there were a Disneyland in England, I'm sure they'd have this ride. It went a bit too fast for my taste, but I really did find it fun. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if they opened a clone of it in the "Global Village" at Disneyworld.

We did not see two of Mme. T's attractions. The basement of the museum is their "chamber of horrors". Originally this is where they stored the wax castings of people who were executed in revolutionary France, which is how Madame Tussaud learned her art. I'm not sure if those are still there or not. What they mostly feature now is a live horror show that you have to pay an additional admission to enter. We peeked in the entrance, but I wasn't prepared to pay an additional £10 over and above the already steep admission. The other thing we didn't see was their planetarium show (the reason for the dome on the building). That actually was included in our admission, but it would have involved a half hour wait. I've seen planetarium shows in Illinois and Mississippi, and I really didn't see a lot of reason I needed to see one in London.



**Wax figure of the museum proprietress, Madame Tussaud**

Like pretty much every museum on the planet, Madame Tussaud's ended with a gift shop. As you might expect from the price of everything else here, the shop was incredibly

expensive. I did buy one item, a tin shaped like Big Ben with British toffees in it that I gave to my friend Mary. That was £6.50 (\$11.40), and it was just about the cheapest thing in the place.



**with a "guard" at Mme. T's experiences in London.]**

We made our way past the sting of tourist shops outside Mme. T's and back to Baker Street station. It was around 4:30 now, and totally dark outside. We got on the Bakerloo Line and took it southward to the end of the line at Elephant and Castle (ALE-lu-font 'n' CAH-sul) station. The amusing name (which apparently comes from a pub that once stood on a road in the area) was hard to resist, so Margaret and I decided to explore the area.

Elephant and Castle station is one of the deepest in the network, and it's also awkwardly designed. To get to the exit from the Bakerloo Line, we had to first walk to the Northern Line area and then walk the full length of that platform. Finally we went up an elevator, as there are no escalators in this station. We made it through the turnstiles and emerged in the heart of the E & C neighborhood.

E & C, which is in the Borough of Lambeth, is definitely one of the low rent areas of Greater London. The station exit leads to a shopping center that one guidebook described as a perfect example of "brutalist" architecture. The huge cement box has a small statue out front in the shape of an elephant and a castle. There are no major stores here. The most important thing is a big flea market that fills the basement area. The "anchor" stores are a small Tesco supermarket and a Dress for Less outlet where everything cost £5, £10, or £20 (\$9, \$18, or \$35). There were also a number of "pound shops" (the equivalent of dollar stores, though here everything would cost \$1.75), and the single largest space in the mall is taken up by JobCentre Plus, the government employment office. The shops that line the hallways show that this is definitely one of the most multicultural of all the neighborhoods in London, quite obviously home to recent immigrants and "guest workers". There were restaurants and food shops representing cuisines from around the globe, and signs in numerous different languages. **[As is often the case when I travel, this excursion off the beaten path was one of my favorite**

The most common language here was, of all things, Spanish. I expect to see Spanish signs in Chicago or Los Angeles, but I was definitely not expecting to use my foreign language skills in London. I gather E & C is home to lots of South Americans. The mall had several money order places that advertised rates for sending "giros" to places like Bolivia and places selling phone cards valid for calls to Peru and Ecuador (at about 20p or 35¢ a minute). E & C Shopping Centre was mostly empty when we walked through it, but many of the people who were here were Hispanic. A lot of the rest were of African descent.

In addition to Spanish, there was also a lot of signage in the Cyrillic alphabet. I had heard that lots of East Europeans worked in England, and this was probably confirmation of that. I didn't really notice people in the mall that were identifiably Russian, but they could certainly shop here without any problem.

I spent quite some time going through a plastic menu that a grungy café in the mall had posted in its window. The place (a greasy spoon diner if ever there was one) certainly had a broad menu. There were dishes from African, South American, and Asian traditions, plus a lot of traditional British fare. One of the best deals was the “classic English breakfast”. For £3.25 (\$5.70) this featured eggs, sausage, bacon, boiled potatoes, mushrooms, baked beans, and grilled tomato, plus coffee and orange juice. I doubt anywhere else in Britain offered that much food for that little money.

**[The Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre is apparently being demolished in 2012. The borough council is re-developing the area as a “retail destination”, which I’m sure means the cheap little restaurant and the other interesting features of the old mall will be long forgotten.]**

We passed on eating and left E & C Centre. We took a different exit out of the mall than the one through which we had entered and proceeded to again get lost trying to find the station. We did eventually find it, though, and we made our way to the elevator. The lift we were in made strange noises, like some sort of alarm was going off. No one seemed to react in any way, though, and we got down to the platform safely. We took the Northern Line back to the hotel, dumped our stuff, and then went out for dinner.



**Elephant and Castle**

We took the train two three stops north to Balham station. Once again we were disoriented leaving the station. We ended up going the wrong way down Balham High Street, which gave us an intended grand tour of this rather nondescript middle class neighborhood. The most prominent feature in Balham is the station, which is a major interchange with the national rail service. National rail runs above ground, and the viaduct basically splits the neighborhood in half. On either side of the station are more of those same shops that appear on every “high street” in Britain. Beyond the business are fairly nice apartment buildings, each built around a pleasant courtyard. They reminded me of the apartments in Oak Park (a near west suburb near Chicago) and the area near the art museum in Minneapolis. Several of the “flats” had Christmas decorations in their windows, so even though we covered more distance than we might have chosen, it was a pleasant walk.

Our destination tonight was another chain that appears on high streets throughout England, Nando’s. Based in South Africa, these restaurants apparently also operate in Canada, Australia, India, Egypt, and Malaysia. **[They’ve recently expanded into much of Europe and also to the Washington, D.C. area.]** Their specialty (spay-see-AL-uh-tee) is Portuguese peri-peri chicken, poultry marinated in a sauce flavored with a hot pepper native to Mozambique. They offer several levels of heat (we chose “medium”), and I must say the stuff is really quite good.

We were greeted by a portly black woman who had asked if we had been to Nando’s before. (We must have looked like “newbies”.) She led us to a table and placed a wooden chicken there to indicate that the table was occupied. We were to look over the menu and then go to the bar to order. The food would then be delivered to the table within ten minutes. Both Margaret and I had a quarter chicken with spicy rice and coleslaw. (Other side dishes were available, but those were most appealing to us.) I also had toasted and buttered pita bread and a Fanta orange soda, while Margaret chose to have a bottle of hard cider. Our total bill was about £15 (\$26), and it would have been about \$9 each without the drinks—quite affordable by British standards and a very tasty meal.

After dinner we went across the street to a Woolworth’s store. “Woolies” is still alive and well in Britain, after having shuttered their last door in America two decades ago. **[Apparently the British chain went under in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis.]** They have the exact same stuff you’d have found at a dime store in your childhood: sewing supplies, children’s clothes, “pick ‘n’ mix” candy, cheap toys, kitchen ware, etc. There are, of course, also a few items that didn’t exist back then, mostly in the form of cheap electronics. You certainly wouldn’t call it a **dime** store, though. There’s nothing here that costs remotely close to the equivalent of a dime (6p). The cheapest stuff is about 50p (87¢), and most things are several pounds.

I bought a few snacks, including a Cadbury product that featured pressed chocolate items shaped like potato chips (or “crisps” as the Brits would say), plus a newspaper and the tiniest can of Pepsi I’ve ever seen (150 mL, or about ½ cup at a cost of 39p or 68¢). **[I think that can generates more questions from my students than anything else in my Pepsi collection.]** Margaret also picked up some candy, as well as some clearanced Christmas stuff. It was fascinating to be in a type of store I haven’t even thought of for years.

We made our way back to the tube station and headed back to Colliers Wood. We spent most of the evening just reading, resting up, and watching a bit of TV. The news on every station revolved around the weather. Apparently today was the coldest day Britain had seen in more than a decade, and the meteorologists went on and on about how London had gotten down to 10 below zero (Celsius, that is ... it would be 14 above Fahrenheit). Much of the country appeared to be crippled by about four inches of snow.

They're obviously not used to real winter weather here. **[We heard similar reports last Christmas when a cold front hit the American South.]**

Aside from the weather most of the news was crime-related. British TV has every bit as much sensationalism as its American counterpart, making a relatively safe country seem as if danger was lurking everywhere. The biggest non-weather-related story was about a young girl who was kidnapped while taking a bath at her home in northern England. The girl was released quickly and suffered no great harm. I don't wish the experience on anyone, but it's not exactly the crime of the century.

We went to bed fairly early tonight. The room had finally warmed to a reasonable temperature, so I at least slept pretty well.

## Friday, December 30, 2005

I was awake quite early this morning and got out of bed right at 7:00. Margaret was still groggy when I finished my shower, so I decided to set out and do a bit of exploring. It was clear when I went outside that the weather had changed. It was a bit warmer than it had been the past two days, but with the change in temperature had come rain. It was a gloomy day, with a steady drip that was just enough to be annoying. I gather this is pretty typical weather for London.

I crossed the street to Colliers Wood station and took the train one stop north to Tooting Broadway. Of all the neighborhood high streets I saw in London, Tooting was definitely my favorite. It's a pretty neighborhood, with a bit more architectural character to the buildings than most of the others. The houses, a mix of rowhouses ("terraces") and apartments, seem well kept. The place also seemed to be bustling with activity at all hours. There was more of a selection of stores here, too. In addition to Carphone Warehouse, Ladbrokes, Boots Pharmacy, Sainsbury's and the like, there was a nice Marks and Spencer department store and a wide variety of ethnic (mostly Indian) restaurants. If I were British, I think Tooting would be an interesting place to live or work. **[Interestingly, in doing a few web searches on Tooting, I find it has a reputation for being a dangerous, crime-ridden place. In investigating further, though, it appears a lot of that reputation is racism against a large south Asian population in the area. In fact, statistics show Tooting has one of the lowest crime rates in London, but that doesn't stop numerous bloggers from proclaiming that going there is inviting oneself to be mugged.]**



[Mcdonalds.co.uk](http://Mcdonalds.co.uk) photo of what I should have ordered

I wandered around the neighborhood a bit and walked into the Tooting McDonalds. This seems to be the gathering place for the local senior citizens ("pensioners" or "concessions" in Brit-speak) in the same way that older people used to congregate at Hardees every morning back home. (Now that we don't have a Hardees anymore, I don't know what the elderly do for breakfast. **[It's split about half and half between McDonalds and the Hy-Vee deli.]**) Most of the old folks appeared to have a hot beverage and either a doughnut or an English muffin with jelly. That combination would cost about £1.75 (\$3) with a "discount for concessions" applied. Coffee and a pastry at the neighborhood coffee bars would be more like £5, so "Mickey's" is a bargain by comparison.

I ordered black coffee (the beverage appears to come in "black" and "white" in England) and an Egg McMuffin. Not knowing local custom, I hadn't realized that in Britain "Egg McMuffin" meant precisely the item I had gotten on the airplane a couple days ago—an English muffin with egg and cheese, but no meat. What Americans would call an Egg McMuffin is called a Bacon McMuffin in England, though on the east side of the Atlantic it's made with strips of bacon rather than the round Canadian bacon we have at home. Having ordered already, I took the meatless dish that was offered. My bill was £2.20 (\$3.85), more than it would be at home (if a vegetarian McMuffin were even available) but cheap for the United Kingdom.

I ate the McMuffin quickly and made my way back to the tube station. Many people eat on the tube, but I really didn't feel comfortable doing that. I had no problem nursing coffee, though, and I did so as I made my way south.

I decided that I might as well get all four zones worth of value out of my travelcard, so I decided to take the next train down to the end of the line at Morden, two stops south of Colliers Wood. The tunnel ends just shy of Morden, with the platforms there located in an open cut that let in the rain this morning. There seemed to be a lot of construction going on in the station, though I can't say for sure just what they were doing. They certainly had lots of yellow tape, though.

Morden was also a lively neighborhood, though I can't say I liked it nearly so well as Tooting. This was the most suburban place I had been, and that really wasn't a positive feature. There was more car traffic here than anywhere else in London. The station faced onto a roundabout where several major streets intersected, and a motorway passed just to the east. A lot of the businesses had parking lots, most of which seemed to be full at 8am. Nothing in the neighborhood was more than about 40 years old, and it all looked rather cheaply constructed. Of the places I've been in America, Morden's business district reminded me most of Jamaica, Queens, though Harlem Avenue in Chicago also shares some similarities. I had read a rather nasty review of Morden before coming here. In it a woman from India said the place stank worse than the streets in her homeland. Having not been to India, I can't judge one way or the other on that. I really didn't find Morden all that unappealing, but it isn't a place I'd go rushing back to were I to come to London again.

The mix of business in Morden was definitely more downscale than in Tooting. The most prominent store was called Iceland and appeared to be a supermarket that specialized in frozen food. There were also a lot of pound shops **[the equivalent of dollar stores]** and several places that offered discount auto parts. The most interesting store in the neighborhood was a place run by Oxfam, the charity that fights hunger. It wasn't open yet, so I couldn't say for sure what was inside. The restaurant choices were also fairly limited. Basically there was a kebob place, a fish and chips shop, and a Wimpy's hamburger joint.

I didn't really do anything in Morden. I just circled the neighborhood to see what was there and made my way back to the station. There were trains on opposite sides of the island platform when I arrived, with no indication as to which one would leave next. The one on the right was full of people while the one on the left was empty, so I headed right. After about half a minute I heard an unintelligible crackly announcement on the station P.A. Everyone in the train got up and marched across the platform to the other train. I followed suit, and almost immediately it was the train on the left that headed out.

I got off about three minutes later at Colliers Wood and made my way back to the hotel. Margaret was up and dressed by this time, and I joined her down in the lobby for my second breakfast of the morning. (Margaret tells me she doesn't care much for breakfast food—particularly in the morning; I on the other hand could live on it.) After breakfast we went over to the station and set off for the day.

We got off the train back at Old Street, the stop by Wesley's City Road Chapel. This time we took the exit marked "NORTH SIDE OLD STREET, EASTBOUND", at the opposite side of the station from where we had been two days ago. It was still a nasty drizzle when we left the station, and the relatively long walk we had ahead of us would ensure we'd get thoroughly soaked. We walked eastward on Old Street past a pub called Nelson's Retreat, a Tex-Mex restaurant, a sushi place, and yet another Express by Holiday Inn. After that we entered the East London borough of Hackney. We continued a little over half a mile until we reached Shoreditch (SHOT-itch) Town Hall (now mostly home to JobCentre Plus)



**Kingsland Road – Shoreditch**

and a lovely old Congregational church (quite possibly part of the London Missionary Society that spread the Pilgrim faith to the far-flung islands of the South Pacific.) **[Congregational churches in Britain, by the way, are now part of the URC, the United Reformed Church. Having planned worship services at my church during our interim between pastors, I've borrowed their materials on several occasions.]** We turned north there and walked another quarter mile or so down Kingsland Road.

Shoreditch looked older than most parts of London we saw. It's probably dates to Victorian times, though a few buildings here and there could be older **[and some others may have been built to look old]**. There's pretty much nothing in the neighborhood that looks to be post-WWII. That surprised me, since East London was one of the areas hit worst in the Blitz. This was also one of the few areas that didn't have all the "high street" chain stores. The locals must head over to Docklands to visit Carphone Warehouse. I wouldn't go so far as to say Shoreditch is really all that traditional in its lifestyle. If anything, I'd bet the yuppie inhabitants of its "lofts" just don't do much in their local neighborhood. It did make a nice change of scenery for us tourists, though.

As we continued northward it started sleeting. Fortunately we soon reached our destination, the Geffrye Museum. This endowed museum is located in a former almshouse, an institution that housed some of London's destitute elderly before the welfare state turned them into pensioners. The stately brick building is built in a U-shape surrounding one of the finest front lawns in London. We made our way across the lawn and up to the main door. It was about 9:55, and an employee rather gruffly told us they would not open until 10:00.

Also waiting to enter was a young man with a baby carriage (Brits would call it a "pushcar") who was huddling under a tree to avoid the sleet. I wandered around the yard as we waited, but Margaret huddled with him, and she had quite a story to tell. Apparently the child in the carriage was named Samuel. His father was apparently quite perturbed that the museum wouldn't let him in, particularly given the weather. He said it made him want to toké up (that is, smoke a marijuana cigarette). The words had barely gotten out of his mouth when he proceeded to do just that—in front of both Margaret and Samuel, not to mention whatever security cameras the museum, the Hackney Council, or the Shoreditch police might have installed nearby.

We were soon allowed to enter, and I was surprised to find there was no admission—a most pleasant change after the excessively priced attractions we saw yesterday. Even if they had charged, I would probably still say that the Geffrye was my favorite of all the places we visited in London. It's really a fascinating museum. The place claims to portray "the history of British domestic life," and they do a pretty good job of it. The museum's symbol is a keyhole, and you really do get the feeling of looking through the keyhole and inside people's homes. Room after room in the almshouse is furnished and decorated in the style of every era of English history, from the Middle Ages to the new millennium. They show how a wide variety of people



**Geffrye Museum (former Ironmongers Almshouse)**

(from wealthy aristocrats to simple laborers) lived through the ages, and explain how those lifestyles were affected by the political, social, and scientific events of each era. On the surface it's a collection of furniture, but it really is a truly fascinating historical museum.



**Website photos of rooms from the Victorian and Depression eras decorated for the Christmas Past Exhibit Geffrye Museum—London**

It was especially fascinating to visit the Geffrye during "festive season". They whole museum had been transformed into a special exhibit called "Christmas Past, Christmas Present", with each room decorated as it might have been in the period it was portraying. The introduction of holly, mistletoe, yule logs, twelfth parties, wassail, Christmas trees, cards, crackers, Father Christmas, and traditional holiday foods were all explained. They also covered the banning of

Christmas in Puritan times, they showed how the holiday was celebrated in wartime, and they explained the gradual transition of Christmas from a religions celebration to a secular and commercial holiday. Being from a family of largely English ancestry and with my mother's many British penpals, many of the British customs are part of my holiday traditions (and a lot of the German customs in the town where I live now still seem alien to me). It was fascinating to learn more about them here.

One of the main points they make in the exhibit is that Christmas “traditions” are almost entirely invented and ever-changing. They sold a book about the exhibit in their gift shop that made a profound statement in its conclusion: “One thing is for certain. Every successive generation will continue to say that ‘Christmas isn’t what it used to be!’ They will be right, of course.” **[I bought that book as a souvenir, and I’ve gone through it every Christmas since. Reading about the traditions is in itself a wonderful holiday tradition.]**

In addition to the domestic life exhibits, there are two big public spaces in the museum. One is the chapel that was used by residents at the almshouse; the other was their library and continues to be used as a reading room. I was amused to see here copies of the local council paper. Before leaving on this trip I had visited websites of many of the boroughs we would be visiting in London. Among the most interesting features were the free papers the borough councils distribute as propaganda to their residents, which are invariably available for download online. *My Merton, Newham Mag, Lambeth Life, and Croydon Report* provided fascinating insights into what life in London must be like. I hadn’t actually come across *Hackney Today* prior to the trip, but it was obviously in the same genre.

The final exhibit at the Geffrye Museum is called the “West Indian Front Room”, and it tells the story of immigrant life in Britain. They note something that is probably also true among many American immigrants. It has long been important to Britain’s Caribbean population to have a front room worthy of entertaining guests, even if the bedrooms and kitchen are virtually unfurnished. The furnishings are not necessarily luxurious, but they must be pleasant and well cared for—something that was very clear in the sample room. It intrigued me that the festive decorations they’d put up here included paper chains similar to those I put up in my classroom each Christmas. I had been told years ago that was a Mexican tradition. I suppose it probably goes with low income in general, a way of making a big show very cheaply.

I dropped a fair amount of money in the Geffrye gift shop. Steve and Terry had given me some cash as a Christmas gift, and I used their money to buy the accompanying book for the Christmas exhibit, as well a couple of other books and a small Christmas decoration **[a set of paper Christmas trees similar to those that hang from the ceiling in the Depression room photo—it’s become a tradition to put that up in my classroom at school]**. I’ve already looked through the books several times, and I know I’ll continue to look at them frequently in the future. They bring back nice memories of a really fascinating museum. **[I do STRONGLY recommend that anyone who visits London go to the Geffrye. It really does provide a fascinating insight into the lives of ordinary British people through the years.]**

We considered having lunch at the Geffrye’s café, which serves a combination of traditional British food and east Asian cuisine. We also checked the menu at Nelson’s Retreat on the way back to the tube station. The Geffrye café was a bit pricey, and the pub wasn’t yet serving lunch when we walked past **[lunch tends to be served late in England, which is odd since dinner is served comparatively early]**, so we just made our way underground.

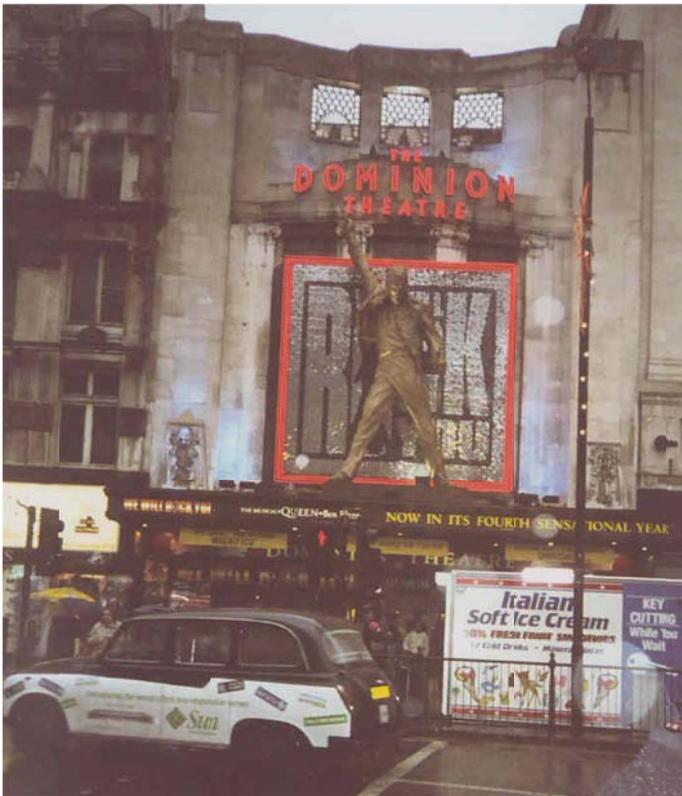


**Memorial plaque at Bethnal Green underground station**

censored during the war, but today there is a small plaque above the stairwell where it happened. It was one of three tube disasters during the war, the others occurring when bombs exploded at Balham and Bank.

We went south two stops to Bank and then east two stops to Bethnal Green, where we surfaced to have a quick look around. The tube station in this rapidly gentrifying East London neighborhood has an important, if tragic, place in history. This was the site of the largest loss of civilian life on the Allied side in World War II. The station, like much of the London Underground, was used as a shelter during the Blitz. On March 3, 1943, the air raid sirens sounded and people poured into the station. A woman carrying a baby tripped on the stairs, causing a chain reaction with others falling on top of her. In the end 173 people were crushed to death in the disaster. Apparently the mad rush was mostly caused by people reacting to the sound of anti-aircraft guns that had recently been placed in nearby Victoria Park. News of the Bethnal Green disaster was

Besides the plaque there's nothing much to see at Bethnal Green. Unlike much of the tube, it doesn't even have an above-ground station house. I did snap a photo of a street sign for "ROMAN ROAD", both because of the unique name and because it was one of the few clearly identified streets we saw in London. Otherwise it's a brick neighborhood—greener than most, but not much different than most other neighborhoods in London.



**Dominion Theatre – Tottenham Court Road**

me. The walls were lined with drawings of aristocratic gentlemen, similar to the cartoons they used to run in the *New Yorker* magazine. Otherwise the main feature of the place was an old fashioned manually operated till (cash register).

We spent much of our meal people watching. Our fellow diners included an elderly man and his middle aged companion. I'm not sure what the story was there, but they certainly seemed intimate enough to be a gay couple—though older than any I'd ever seen. There were also two Asian girls who talked in distinguished British accents.

With a single exception the menu was entirely a la carte. A lot of British restaurants seem to work that way. That makes the main courses themselves seem not too expensive, but a full meal can add up to a lot. Margaret had their set lunch, the equivalent of the "menu del dia" they'd have in a Spanish-speaking country. It included cannelloni with a spinach and ricotta filling, "chips" (French fries), and a small salad. I had minestrone and an omelet. The puffy omelet was folded over and served by itself, making a rather large plate look quite empty. **[When I worked back at the Iris, one of the big things I learned was that restaurant food should be served on plates appropriate to the portions; if anything, it's better to serve on too small a plate than on one that's too large.]** Margaret had tea, and I had coffee, which was of course instant. We also had dessert ("pudding" or "afters" in Brit-speak). I had apple crumble topped with warm custard **[which together are just about the definitive British dessert]**, and Margaret had a sponge cake with the same custard. The food was all very good, and by London standards it was indeed cheap. The total bill for the two of us was about £15 (\$26.25), and we could have gotten by for as little as £10. (... And, by the way, most restaurants advertised "bargain" lunches for about £15 per person.)

The check at the Stockpot clearly indicated that no gratuity was included. Tips are apparently a fairly contentious issue in Britain. Unlike mainland Europe (where service is almost always included) or the United States (where it pretty much never is), including service or not appears to be at the whim of the restaurant here. Brits themselves have a global reputation as notoriously bad tipplers, generally having the opinion I do that service should be included, whether it actually is or not. According to guides, if you have to place your order at a bar or counter, no tip is ever expected. Indeed, it's apparently "bad form" to tip a bartender for drinks. At a restaurant when service isn't included, a gratuity is expected, though the rate tends to run less than it does in America—more in the 10% range. What no guide bothered to indicate was whether Britain, like America, has a reduced wage rate for waiters, or whether their minimum wage is the same £5.05 an hour that other service workers make. If it is the same, I'd be inclined to tip little or nothing. (There's no reason they should get a tip when the cook and busboy don't.) If they make less, though, I'd be inclined to tip more. We did leave an American-sized tip, so presumably Miss Eastern Europe was happy with us.

We next went six stops west on the central line to Tottenham Court Road (the first word is pronounced much like TAUGHT-numb). We were pleased to come right out of the station and see the theatre where we'd be attending a play tonight. However when we tried to find our next destination, once again we headed off in the wrong direction. That really wasn't too bad, though, since it gave us a fascinating glimpse of Londoners going about their business. TCR Station is at the junction of its namesake and Oxford Street, in the heart of London's shopping district. This isn't really a tourist district, but where real people go when they want to shop downtown. "Festive season" is a school holiday and also a time off work for many Britons (who average 40 days of paid vacation a year—the lowest number in Europe, but way ahead of Americans **[who can only claim to have more vacation than the third world]**). It seemed as if everyone in London was out shopping today, enjoying the after-Christmas sales.

After several wrong turns we finally made it to the Stockpot Restaurant, a place I'd found while doing a web search for "**cheap restaurant london**", the same way I'd discovered Nando's chicken. The Stockpot is apparently an institution in the Soho neighborhood, operating their hole-in-the-wall establishment on Old Compton Street for about 150 years. It looks quaint both inside and out, and it made a fun place to have lunch.

Our waitress was a bleached blonde bombshell who did not speak English particularly well. I'd guess she was from somewhere beyond what we used to call the Iron Curtain. "Natasha" directed us to a rather crowded back room where we sat down—me at a bench along the wall and Margaret at a chair facing

After lunch we did a bit more wandering through the shopping area. The only store we actually went inside of was a Borders bookstore on Oxford Street that was pretty much identical to its cousins on State Street in Chicago or Hennepin Avenue in Minneapolis **[the latter has unfortunately since closed]**. We used their "W.C." (bookstores are a great place to find a toilet in any large city) and then spent some time browsing through the store. Books are one of the few things that aren't expensive in England. Prices in many currencies are printed on the cover of most books, and the price in pounds was pretty much a direct conversion of the dollar price. I don't know if they're taxed at a different rate or if we're just used to paying absurdly high prices for books already.

I spent most of my time in the CD section. I was hoping to find albums by a British group I had come across while searching around online before this trip. Project Adorno is (or in British usage I should say "are" **[collective subjects ALWAYS require plural verbs in British usage]**) two young men who perform electronic versions of a wide variety of musical styles. **[A review I found of them says, "Project Adorno are a South West London poetry/music duo whose material draws upon elements of '80s electro-pop, Cockney music hall, and French chanson.]"** They're probably best classified in the "alternative" section, and mostly they play at bars and festivals. **[I just re-checked the group's website, and it appears they continue at about the same level of success today. They have tickets available for a performance this month (July 2011) at an auditorium in Lancashire. Interestingly they're from Morden, the end of the Northern Line where I'd gone this morning.]** The duo has recorded a number of albums, but the one that caught my interest used the London Underground as its theme. They spent two days traveling from station to station, randomly choosing their destinations and composing a song about each neighborhood where they got off. Their goal was to visit a station for each letter of the alphabet, from A to Z (zed). The music is fascinating, and it continues to run through my head today.

Among the songs I liked best was a salute to Amersham (AM-ush'm), which is at the end of the longest line in the system, actually outside of Greater London. The idea of the song is that the place is so far away it might as well be a foreign country:

Would you like to go to Amersham,  
In the leafy shires of the Buckingham countryside?  
Feeling like a holiday without a doubt,  
Twenty-seven miles from the middle of London town;  
A short hop on the tube, the Metropolitan Line;  
Be sure to set your watches to Amersham time.

Need a summer holiday in Amersham?  
On a big double-decker bus we're clipping the shadows on board;  
We could go to Amersham,  
Sure to have a ball in Buckingham County.  
Do they speak the same language in old Amersham?  
Wonder if we need to find a bureau de change?  
Wonder if there's any electricity?  
Wonder if there's anything at all?

Do we need a passport?  
Should I bring my sunglasses?  
Do we need any jabs or inoculations  
In Amersham?  
It's Amersham for me!

Would you like to go to Amersham with me?

If we'd had time, I'd love to have gone to Amersham, though it would have cost £3.50 (\$6.10) each way on top of the travelcard for each of us to go the extra zones out there **[Amersham is in zone #9]**. I'm sure there's nothing of interest there, but it would have been fun to see anyway.

Another song saluted the Bow Church station, which is on the DLR in Newham a little ways north of Canning Town. I had read elsewhere about this station which is named after a church that stands in the middle of a roundabout surrounded by apartment towers. Many tourists apparently come to the rather obscure neighborhood called Bow thinking that the church located here is the famous St. Mary Le Bow Church. It's said that one can only be a true cockney if born within the sound of the bells of St. Mary Le Bow. The famous church is in central London, just east of St. Paul's Cathedral. The Bow Church for which the DLR station was named serves a lot of Cockneys (a name that applies to all East Londoners), but there's nothing particularly noteworthy about it. Project Adorno wrote a jazzy song called "Bogus Bow" in reference to the church.

Among the other interesting songs were a direct rip-off of "Scarborough Fair" saluting a market fair near Fairlop station, a salute to Queensway station (located near many embassies) which notes that Chad and Romania have identical flags, a song made up of nothing but random numbers that saluted a bingo parlor across from the Tooting Broadway station, a Caribbean-inspired ditty about Dollis Hill station, and a Slavic-sounding number where the whole point of the song is that Vauxall (a station near Elephant and Castle) is pronounced exactly the same way as the Russian word for railway station (Вокзал).

It should be noted that there are no tube stations beginning with J, X, Y, or Z. For "J" the group went to High Barnet, the terminal for most of the Northern Line trains, which is apparently "twinned" (in America we'd say it has a "sister city" agreement) with a

city in Uganda called Jinja. For “X” they went to Charing Cross, a reminder to those who feel “Xmas” takes Christ out of Christmas that the Brits invented the abbreviation using “X” for the sign of the cross and therefore Christ himself. (I must say, though, that the tube itself on its electronic signs refers to the “cross” in Charing Cross with a plus sign ... CHARING +.) “Y” was represented by a “ghost” station called York Road, whose station house still stands abandoned in northwest London. Nothing seemed to work for them with “Z”, though, so they found an intersection of two lines (the Metropolitan and Bakerloo lines) that didn’t have a station. The group went to and photographed that intersection, which is above ground, and called the place “Zahid Junction” after an Asian acquaintance they knew in that area.

I had copied my students in downloading .mp3 versions of the songs on *A-Z of the Underground* before we came to London (something that takes quite a while on a dial-up internet connection). I would have liked to get a legitimate copy of the album, but unfortunately the Oxford Street Borders (and Sainsbury’s in Colliers Wood, for that matter) had nothing by the group in stock. It’s also not on Amazon.com, which pretty much means it’s not for sale anywhere. I guess I’ll have to make due with my illicit cyber-music. **[My bet is the group’s CDs are essentially vanity published. They probably bring limited quantities to their concerts and sell them there to interested parties. Their name does bring one result on Amazon these days. Apparently one of their cuts is on a 2004 compilation CD called *The Greatest Who Never Made It*. Distributed by a label I’ve never heard of (Fef Records), there’s only a minimal description of the CD, and it is listed as “temporarily out of stock”. If anyone does find a U.S. source for legal versions of their work, I’d still be interested in buying a CD.]**

It was mid-afternoon at this point, which left us an awkward amount of time in the day. The one other thing I’d have really liked to see downtown, the British Museum, is one of the biggest museums on earth. Even a quick visit to some of the highlights would likely have taken longer than the time available before their 4:30 closing time. **[A major pet peeve of mine is that so many major museums have very limited hours. There’s no reason why a huge tourist attraction like this couldn’t be open until at least 6pm.]** The museum is also a fair hike from any tube station, and while she didn’t complain, it was clear that Margaret had already done more walking in the cold rain than she really wanted to. I think I’ve seen most of the British Museum’s collection either in books or on TV documentaries, so I can’t say I was horribly disappointed at skipping it either. As I always do, I’d have fun checking out the places tourists aren’t supposed to visit.

As we took the train back south, I mentioned to Margaret the Oxfam store I had seen in Morden this morning. She thought that sounded interesting and wanted to check it out, so we passed up Colliers Wood and continued to the end of the line.



**Website photo of Oxfam shop – Morden**

locked but squeaky clean Caribbean man, seemed pleased that we had stopped in and admired our various purchases.

The Oxfam store was fascinating, and not really what I’d expected. It was a combination of a second hand outlet (like a Salvation Army or Goodwill or St. Vincent de Paul store) and a place that sold merchandise (logo items and third world handicrafts) that supported the charity. The majority of their customers come from the relatively poor population of Morden, and it’s definitely not a tourist-oriented store. That really made it more fun, though. We spent quite a while browsing through both parts of the store, and both Margaret and I made some purchases. I bought a second-hand mug and several sets of Christmas cards. The cards were 50% off, which got the price down to what would probably be full price in America—but for charity a price I was willing to pay. **[Over the years the vast majority of the Christmas cards I’ve sent have been charity cards. I’ve never seen Oxfam sell things in America, but I was perfectly willing to give them money in England.]** I also looked through the used clothes, but there was nothing in my size that was screaming “buy me”. Margaret also got Christmas cards, as well as some lovely crystal glassware. The clerk, a dread-

We took the tube back to Colliers Wood, and Margaret collapsed in bed. I wasn’t tired at all, and I figured I might as well do some more exploring. I walked south past the tower and Sainsbury’s to where Stane Street turns from Colliers Wood High Street to Merton High Street. I continued past the various strip malls that line the site of Merton Abbey and on into the neighborhood of South Wimbledon. Technically not part of Wimbledon district (which residents of the more prestigious address to the west are quick to point out), South Wimbledon is one of the trashier areas I saw in London. Morden wasn’t much to look at, but it was classy compared to this place. The businesses on high street tend toward pound shops, pawnbrokers, or just boarded up empty buildings. Shells of abandoned cars sit rusting on the side streets, and there are broken windows in some of the apartment blocks off in the distance. If this were America, I’d have left this neighborhood in a flash, and I didn’t dawdle here either. I walked with the confidence I always do when I travel, but I was very glad to reach the relative safety of the South Wimbledon tube station.

Something that didn’t make a lot of sense to me was that, unlike the rest of London, South Wimbledon didn’t seem to have much in the way of security cameras. I only counted four in the station (which has to be a record low), and I wasn’t aware of any on the street. It seems interesting that Big Brother only seems to want to snoop in wealthy areas, but not in places where the unblinking eye might actually do some good. **[Chicago, which has far more security cameras than any other American city has been criticized for placing them where wealthy people and/or tourists congregate. Studies there have shown that while crime has gone down where there are cameras, what appears to have happened is that the crime has moved to places that don’t have them.]**

I rode two stops north to Tooting Broadway, which I mentioned before is a **much** nicer neighborhood. I browsed through the Marks and Spencer store and some more clothing (always my favorite souvenir) which I bought with money my niece Rachel had given me for Christmas. It intrigued me that Marks and Spencer would also qualify as a “hypermarket”—it had a large grocery section in addition to all the regular departments. The only M & S I’d ever been to before was in Victoria, Canada, and that one was almost exclusively clothing. **[Apparently in Britain Marks and Spencer sells primarily groceries, though many of their stores do also stock dry goods.]**

I left Marks and Spencer and walked up Tooting High Street (the same Roman road that bisects South Wimbledon and Colliers Wood). Just north of Tooting Broadway station is a big market. They have handicrafts and second hand goods, but mostly it’s a food market much like the “mercados” I’d seen in Spain and Mexico. As in Spain, they had some of the most disgusting kinds of meat imaginable just hanging out in the open. No one seemed to be buying meat, though. The people rushing around seemed most interested in purchasing bread, lettuce, and—of all things—bulk rice. (Supposedly curry is the most popular food among white Britons today—quite a change from the boiled innards of traditional British cuisine.)

I continued up the busy high street all the way to Tooting Bec station. Tooting is a very mixed neighborhood. It’s mostly white, but there are people representing all of London’s ethnic groups. **[As I mentioned earlier, there is a very significant south Asian minority.]** There is a large Moslem population here, and several people in traditional headgear were coming out of a mosque as I walked by. The Moslems include both south Asian people and natives of the Middle East. Several banks and wire services were advertising rates for sending funds to places like Abu Dhabi. (I didn’t know anyone in the Persian Gulf was poor enough to need money sent to them, but I guess I was wrong.)

I made my way to the platform at Tooting Bec, where I had an interesting experience. I boarded the train, but we waited for quite a while in the station. Eventually the driver announced in an voice like that of Apu on *The Simpsons*, “This train will be taken out of service immediately if the gentleman does not remove his foot from the door.” There was another pause, and he repeated the threat with more urgency. Eventually the doors closed, and we started moving. Earlier today we had seen a sign saying that one of the lines was experiencing delays “due to passenger incident”. Perhaps this is the sort of thing they meant by that.

I took the train back to Tooting Broadway and surfaced once again. I decided to walk back down the high street to Colliers Wood. This probably wasn’t the wisest decision, because at about the halfway point between the two stations the rain turned from drizzle to a downpour. The streets soon flooded, and cars splashed huge amounts of water as they passed. I got absolutely soaked, and I can’t say I saw anything all that exciting for my efforts. The area between the business districts of Tooting and Colliers Wood is mostly residential. It’s pretty much all three-story brick rowhouses built in strings of about five and set on small courts away from the main street. It looked like the sort of neighborhood where many of my mother’s penpals lived **[though they were all in the north of England]**. The area appeared quite pleasant, though a sign warning “THIEVES OPPERATE IN THIS AREA” suggested it may not be entirely what it seemed. High Street itself is seems to be the main place in London to get plumbing supplies. Store after store sold toilets, sinks, tubs, faucet fixtures, and water heaters. If I were in the market for such things, I certainly could have done my comparison shopping with ease. As it was, I just sloshed by both the homes and the plumbing stores and back to the hotel.

It was fully dark when I got back to the hotel, though barely 5:00. I spent a while reading papers, and then Margaret and I got ready to go to the show. After cleaning up and changing into the new shirt I’d gotten at Sainsbury’s, we headed back to Tottenham Court Road. We emerged from the train and joined one of the largest crowds I’ve ever seen all making their way up the escalators. TCR is right in the heart of “party central” in London. This was Friday night, and every Londoner between 18 and 30 seemed to be out on a date and passing through this station. I imagined the crush at Bethnal Green and was very pleased to make it safely out to the street.

The sidewalk was also extremely crowded, and it took almost ten minutes just to get across the street. In front of the Dominion Theatre scalpers were hawking tickets. I’m not sure if that’s strictly legal or not in London, but it’s certainly tolerated. We’d already purchased quite expensive tickets (about half again what they would have been in Chicago or Minneapolis, though similar to the prices I decided not to pay for shows in New York), so we just made our way inside. A jovial young man greeted us and offered to sell programs, souvenir books, and glow sticks. I’d never been to a play where I had to purchase the program before, but I forked over £3 (\$5.25) for the same *Playbill* that would be free anywhere in America, and I couldn’t resist an additional £2 (\$3.50) for a glow stick. Margaret also succumbed to glow stick mania, and she paid even more for the glossy book.

The Dominion will certainly win no awards as a jewel of the theatre world. That’s mostly because, unlike the showcase theatres in many American cities which died and were then restored, this one has been continuously active ever since it was built eighty years ago. It definitely shows its years, with well-worn seats, faded wallpaper, and mismatched ceiling lights. We hadn’t really come here for the theatre, though, and nothing about it detracted from the show.

One of the theatre’s most interesting features was the safety curtain. When we entered a decorative curtain appropriate to the show hid the stage, and they also used that same curtain at the end. At intermission, though, they lowered the asbestos safety curtain that keeps the audience safe should the lighting malfunction. According to an announcement buried in the program I had purchased, the theatre is required to “demonstrate proper functioning of the safety curtain” at each performance. We couldn’t help but notice it was there, as it was emblazoned with the words “SAFETY CURTAIN” in letters three feet high.

I should have known from things I’d read ahead of time, but I was taken aback by just how casual the crowd at the theatre was. We tend to have a rather pretentious sense of theatre in America, while in London it seems to be much more for pure

entertainment. I got the feeling I was at a ballgame when I saw vendors going through the crowd before the show and at intermission hawking pop and snacks. They also gave everyone in attendance numerous opportunities to buy those glow sticks. Adding to the casual feeling is the fact that they allow liquor in the house. While in America patrons will sip \$8 glasses of wine at intermission, in England they're chugging beer and whiskey during the performance itself. This was a sold out show, and the well-lubricated house was more than a bit boisterous.

At least one woman had imbibed a bit too much before the show even started. As we made our way to the seat, she came from the lower section (the area we'd call "orchestra" in America; it's "the stalls" in England), gave the usher a glassy-eyed stare, and asked him if she could go out to have a smoke. He said she'd need her ticket to return, noticed it in her hand, and mentioned, "and—by the way—you're seat is upstairs."

We were seated toward the back of the stalls, in row W W. A fascinating group of people was seated in front of us in Row V V. Among them were two people I think (and hope) were a mother and her son. Both were large and had dark, curly hair, but she was much older than he was. They stood out because on several occasions the boy would kiss the woman. Had that happened once, it wouldn't have stood out at all, but they kissed repeatedly, and often with a passion that made me wonder just what the relationship was (it certainly struck me as more affection than most sons would show their mothers—especially in public—and definitely wasn't that British reserve you hear about). The woman also called attention to herself by changing her body position frequently and blocking pretty much everyone's view of the stage.

The show we had come to see was *We Will Rock You*, a play based on the music of the rock group Queen. I had read reviews that ranged from glowing to scathing before we left, so I wasn't really sure what to expect. **[The glowing reviews, by the way, came mostly from theatre-goers, while the scathing ones came from professional critics.]** While no one will pretend it was great theatre, I actually liked the show a lot. The play is set in a Big Brother-like (though actually female-lead) future world run by and for a global corporation. Teenagers in this bleak place are only allowed to listen to innocuous, computer-generated music approved by the corporation. An underground gang develops that searches for their "holy grail", musical instruments that were buried long ago. To make a long story short, they use Queen member Brian May's guitar to save the world, and they all live happily ever after. Yes, it's a silly plot **[described by one critic as "every bit as 'sixth form' as it sounds"]** (though not so outlandish as it might have once seemed, given the way governments everywhere seem to pander to the corporate world), but they manage to pull it off well. Neither the writers nor the cast took themselves too seriously, and they did a surprisingly good job of weaving a common thread through pre-existing and completely unrelated songs. **[I've heard that the Abba musical, *Mama Mia*, is also surprisingly good, though I've not actually seen that show.]**

It did amuse me that the show seems to preach that commercial music is bad, when in fact Queen was (or as the Brits would say "were") one of the most commercially successful bands of all time. John Deacon didn't become the richest man in Colliers Wood **[or rather Putney]** by doing alternative fringe music **[which, by the way, is how Project Adorno classifies themselves]**. It was also interesting that pretty much every character in the show was heterosexual. While they didn't really publicize it the '70s, in retrospect it doesn't take a lot of guessing to figure out why Freddie Mercury (one of the most high profile people to die of AIDS) chose "Queen" as the name of his group—and it wasn't to honor Her Majesty. **[We really were naïve about such things in the '70s. Freddy Mercury was almost stereotypically flamboyant on stage, but there were always pictures of adoring female groupies chasing after him. Only toward the end of his career, when homosexuality became more accepted, did Mercury officially claim to be bisexual. He, by the way, was apparently the only "queen" in Queen. The other band members have all been in long-term marriages to women.]**

Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of the show is that the cast was dominated by women. That's because much of Freddie Mercury's music is all but impossible for most men to sing. Queen's lead singer is said to have had a four-octave range, but he was best known for powerful falsettos. The men in the cast tonight were mostly given ballads and pop standards like "Crazy Little Thing Called Love", while the women got to belt out Queen's signature songs. Making those changes gave the show a bit of a feminist theme, which was another fascinating twist.

The back-up band was exceptional. They managed with just a few instruments to create in a live setting nearly the same sound that countless layers of overdubbing gave on Queen's albums. **[That really was a feat, given that Queen prided itself on extremely complex instrumental backgrounds.]** The cast members also did a nice job with their vocals, treating the songs well but not trying to replicate the original versions. It was also good that the music was not too loud, something Margaret especially found a pleasant surprise. I thought the company did an outstanding job musically, and the acting was as good as could be expected given the rather contrived plot.

A small treat that I almost missed, but Margaret noticed quickly, was a cameo by Brian May himself, who took the stage before the finale and played a few chords on his famous red guitar. I don't know if he does this for every show, or if it was something special for a sell-out at the holidays. Either way, I felt honored. According to the program both May and drummer Roger Taylor (but not John Deacon) were closely involved in producing the show. There are full biographies of both of them in the program, including the fact that May studied for a doctorate in astronomy at Oxford and Taylor has a bachelor's degree in biology, part of a pre-dentistry program—not quite the credentials people usually associate with rock stars. May has also written the scores for other shows, something I wasn't aware of until tonight.

**[Brian May is easily one of the most educated rock stars around. In 2008 he completed his Ph.D. in astrophysics at Imperial College, London—thirty-seven years after starting in the program. His dissertation, *A Survey of Radial Velocities in***



**Brian May (Wikipedia)**

most famous song, and one conspicuously missing from the rest of the show) were projected on the curtain. The audience screamed and held up their glow sticks, and the cast responded with a live version of a song that the group itself never actually performed live. I assume that encore was essentially planned as part of the show, but when it ended they kept doing curtain call after curtain call after curtain call. It really got ridiculous, and frankly I was glad when the house lights finally went up.

The show ended around 10:15 (about two and a half hours, plus intermission), and we made our way back to TCR station. There were **lots** of drunken people in the underground tonight. I'd toyed with the idea of going to see a couple of other places (like Harrod's department store or Piccadilly Circus) lit up at night, but I thought better of it. Public intoxication is apparently a serious problem in England, and a large portion of the other crimes in Britain can be traced to alcohol. Drink-related crime comes under the huge umbrella of Britain's rather Orwellian Anti-Social Behavior Ordinance (ASBO), a statute nearly as broad as the Patriot Act that gives police the power to arrest and detain people without trial. While it's hard to turn the pages of a newspaper without reading about people "being ASBO-ed" for any number of reasons, the law doesn't seem to have cut down on the drinking problem. Neither does the recent change that allows British pubs to be open up to twenty-four hours a day. Legislators thought that allowing more time to drink might keep people from drinking too much at once. The law just changed in November, so perhaps it's too soon to make a judgment, but my observation was that British young people drank at least as irresponsibly as their American counterparts. **[If anything they're worse.]**

Pretty much everyone who had been in the Dominion Theatre headed to TCR station all at once, together with a number of other people who were hopping from club to club. The platform was absolutely packed. In fact, a train arrived just as we got to the bottom of the escalator, but the platform was still crowded when it left. Margaret and I shoved our way clear to the far end. This was a smart move, as it allowed us to actually get a seat in the very first car of the next train. The train was crowded until we got to Waterloo station, where about half the passengers left.

The most interesting people in the car tonight were three people who spoke to each other in French. Two were black women, presumably from somewhere in Africa. The third was a white man who looked British and spoke French well, but not natively. The women got off at Stockwell station, the man at Clapham North. I don't know how they knew each other, but they provided an interesting diversion in our journey.

The train continued to empty out as we made our way southward. By the time we got to Tooting, we were the only people left in our car (or "carriage" as the Brits would say). Both Margaret and I used that opportunity to snap pictures of each other riding on the

*the Zodiacal Dust Cloud*, is available on Amazon.com. I chose not to buy that scholarly treatise,, but I did recently plunk down \$15 for a more broad-audience book May authored entitled *Bang: The Complete History of the Universe*. The guitarist and songwriter is now—of all things—the official head of a major university. Dr. May is now chancellor of Liverpool John Moores University, a school of 24,000+ students that specializes in educating non-traditional students. Interestingly, the previous holder of that position was Cherie Booth, the wife of Prime Minister Tony Blair. While "chancellor" is not really an administrative one (the vice chancellor handles the duties that an American university president would), May is the public face of the largest school of higher learning in northwest England. An asteroid has been named in his honor. May also apparently appears as a science commentator on a British television show, where one of his fellow panelists made the comment "I don't know any scientist who looks as much like Isaac Newton as you do."]

One thing I didn't care for was that the cast seemed to milk the curtain calls. There was a quick curtain call after the finale, after which the words "Do you want 'Bohemian Rhapsody'?" (Queen's



**Inside an empty tube carriage**

tube. When we reached Colliers Wood, we were the only people to get off, the first time that had happened at what was usually a fairly busy station. Only a handful of people were left on the train as it made its way down to Morden.

That fact reminds me of something else that caught me a bit by surprise. Unlike many American cities, London seems to close up early. The play started half an hour earlier than it would have in America (7:30 instead of 8:00), and even with the new law most pubs close before 12:00 (11:30 seems a very popular closing time). Part of the reason for that is that the tube stops running just after midnight. They do have night buses, but they run only about once an hour and form a very skeletal network, as opposed to the underground's frequent and comprehensive service. Having been to New York (which really is "the city that never sleeps") and Chicago and L.A. (where the trains run until at least 2am), closing things up at midnight seems odd.

We made our way from the tube back to the hotel. I turned on the TV and saw a reality show set in, of all places, the tube. It was remarkably similar to the *Airline* show we had watched on American cable the day we left, but this one profiled various tube workers as they went about their day. Most interesting was a man who had applied to be a tube driver and was taking his driving test. It was interesting to see all the different things they require the drivers to do, given that most of the time the job involves pushing a few buttons. **[What's vital, of course, is that they be able to handle any emergency that might come up.]**

I read through the rest of the papers I had acquired and settled into bed. I was asleep about the time the tube shut down for the night.

## Saturday, December 31, 2005

We weren't quite sure what today would bring. That's because we knew since before we had left that the RMT, the union that represents the ticket clerks in the tube stations **[RMT stands for Rail, Maritime, and Transport Workers]**, was planning a twenty-four hour strike starting at noon today. **[Technically it wasn't a strike; in the U.K. such things are called "industrial actions".]** They had chosen New Year's Eve because it's the one time the tube actually does run all night. In fact, a bank was planning to sponsor free travel for revelers between 11:30 tonight and 4:30 tomorrow morning. Those in charge of the tube said they would attempt to run a full service, but pretty much everyone in the media assumed the trains would not be running and it would be chaos for those trying to get back from Trafalgar Square and the Embankment, where London's big New Year's Eve celebrations would take place.

Knowing the strike was scheduled, I spent **a lot** of time online researching all the possible ways we could get back from downtown tonight and, more importantly, get from the hotel back to Victoria Station and on to the airport tomorrow morning. Cabs were pretty much out of the question, as their cost was prohibitive. (The minimum fare for just stepping in a cab is £5 or \$8.25. Fees go up by both time and distance, and there was a fare supplement on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. Combining this, a trip between downtown and Colliers Wood would have cost £50 to £70 or between \$85 and \$120—plus tip.) The good news was that our travelcard would work not just on the tube, but also on any bus or national rail train that operated within zones 1 – 4. Both Wimbledon and Balham rail stations had bus service that went to Colliers Wood, but neither of them connected directly with Victoria. **[The TFL website describes the buses as "spidering" from various points. The intent is that passengers should take the underground to a station and connect there to a local bus.]** I had looked into exactly how the schedules worked. I knew we could make it work, but without the tube running we'd have to allow at least twice as long for every trip as we normally would.

Because of the strike, it was with a bit of uncertainty that we set off this morning. After breakfast we made our way over to the station and were pleased to still see signs announcing that trains would be running all night tonight. We made our way down to the platform and hoped for the best. A train soon arrived that looked emptier than the one we had gotten off last night. That may have simply been because it was a weekend morning, but it was kind of eerie to board an empty train under the circumstances.

We went up to Tooting Broadway and stopped into McDonalds for some real coffee. We then boarded another empty train and headed toward downtown. We got off at Waterloo, where we transferred to the Jubilee Line. This line had just re-opened after a renovation that added length to every platform and an extra car to each train. (I cancelled the first of the three hotels I had booked because the only easy way to get to its North Greenwich location was on the Jubilee Line **[and the renovation was originally scheduled to end after Christmas].**)

The Jubilee Line is the newest link in the world's oldest subway network. The original line from Westminster to the northwest suburbs opened for Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee in the '70s, while the extension (which crosses the Thames four times and mostly serves the south bank) opened just in time for London to celebrate the new millennium. It's impossible not to notice one of the most modern features in the line's stations, platform edge doors. These glass doors, which I'd seen before on the JFK Airtrain, completely close off the platform from the track and tunnel area. When a train arrives it automatically lines up exactly with the platform doors. The train and platform doors then open together, just like the doors on an elevator. Apparently these are required for all new tube construction in London. Not only do they prevent suicides and unauthorized access to the tunnels, but they also prevent the spread of fire. One of the worst disasters on any of the world's subways happened in London back in 1987, when a cigarette dropped in a greasy wooden escalator at Kings Cross station started an underground inferno that killed thirty-one people and injured hundreds. Part of the reason it was such a massive conflagration was that each time a train entered the station, it pushed a wave of air through the tunnel, fanning the flames. In addition to blocking people's access to the tunnel, the platform edge doors also keep air from the tunnel out of the station. **[The downside of that would be that the stations would get very hot in summer.]** They have also gotten rid of the old wood escalators and installed sprinklers in every station, so hopefully a tragedy like Kings Cross won't happen in the future.

The Jubilee Line train had advertising for TfL's plans to serve the 2012 Olympics. In addition to beefing up service on existing lines, they're constructing an entirely new line with express service between Kings Cross and Stratford, the area of Newham where most events will occur. Combining everything, that means a train will arrive in Stratford about every 10 seconds all day long during the games. It's hard to imagine such frequent service, but then we never waited more than a couple minutes for a train during what was theoretically a limited service over the holidays.



**DLR train at Canary Wharf – London**

We went a couple stops east and got off at Canary Wharf station, probably the largest subway station I've ever been inside of in my life. There's not really any need for it to be so huge; it's just a cavernous space underneath one of the Docklands skyscrapers. It also has one of the strangest and more awkward transfers in the system. To get from the Jubilee line to the DLR, we went up a very long escalator and down a concourse. We scanned our travelcards indicating that we had left the paid area of the station. Then just a few feet later we scanned them again to re-enter the station. We continued down the concourse and went up another escalator where we scanned the cards a third time and left to the open air. We then walked down the closest thing Canary Wharf has to a street for a couple of blocks, turned left, and went up another escalator to the elevated Heron's Quay DLR platform. They show this as a simple transfer on the tube map, but it's really quite a challenge.

Canary Wharf is unlike anywhere else I've ever been. One British source described it as "a purpose-built skyscraper community", and that's precisely what it is. Unlike midtown Manhattan or Chicago's Loop, where glass towers mix with century-old brick and stone at a variety of different levels, Canary Wharf is a self-contained neighborhood of recently-built skyscrapers fully separated from what used to be "downtown" London. (There are modern towers in central London, too, but Canary Wharf is well away from them—or from much of anything else, for that matter.) Margaret found the place decidedly ugly. I like modern architecture a lot more than she does, but I must admit it did have a rather sterile feeling—especially on a Saturday when almost none of the 100,000 people who work here was anywhere around.

There are some similarities between Canary Wharf and the office park complexes in Bloomington, Minnesota or Naperville, Illinois. The big difference is that the Midwestern suburbs are very car dependent, while Canary Wharf is designed to be almost entirely car-free. What's more, the towers here are tall enough to look like they belong downtown, rather than in the suburbs. It's amusing that Canary Wharf is part of the Borough of Tower Hamlets, a place originally named because it was a residential area near the Tower of London. The new skyscrapers do put a new twist on the name, though.

Canary Wharf is the first of several "tower cities" that are planned to be built in a ring around central London. None of these is really a suburban area (indeed before its redevelopment Canary Wharf would have been called "inner city", with all the negative connotations that term suggests), but they are intended to spread out development and take pressure away from "the square mile" at the traditional city center.

All we did at Canary Wharf was to walk from the tube station to the DLR station. Unless you work here, the main attraction is shopping. There are several major malls housed on the lower floors of the office towers, though none of them seemed to have anything we couldn't have found on every neighborhood high street. We just walked on past and continued on our way to somewhere else.

The DLR train we boarded had the destination Lewisham (pronounced more like "loosh", with barely an "m" at all), the terminal of an extension that opened a couple years ago. We didn't go quite that far. We tunneled under the Thames and got off underground at the Cutty Sark station on the waterfront in Greenwich. On the wall by the escalators here they have mounted the cutting blade of the tunnel-boring machine that drilled the tunnel, a much more modern descendent of the technique pioneered by Brunel we had seen three days ago. There were also signs here warning us "THIEVES ARE KNOWN TO OPERATE IN THIS AREA—WATCH POCKETS AND PURSES". I always do watch my pocket in large cities, and fortunately there was no special reason I had to here.

We emerged right next to the ship called Cutty Sark, a tea clipper that was in its day one of the fastest ships in the world. We could have toured it (and the £4.50 admission was actually pretty reasonable), but honestly there didn't appear to be much to see. We snapped photos and made our way eastward to the other points of interest in Greenwich.

Greenwich (GRENN-itch) was easily the nicest part of London we went to. The place just dripped of money and came across with a "yuppie central" sort of feeling. It really is a lovely old neighborhood, but I must say it looks almost fake because everything is so perfectly cared for. It's almost like an "Olde Worlde" theme park, with nary a crack nor a stain on any of the bricks. **[While the feeling is a bit artificial, it really is quite pretty.]**

The stores here definitely have a different feel than places like Colliers Wood or Tooting. It's the one place we didn't see Sainsbury's or Tesco, though they did have Carphone Warehouse and several other chains competing with it. There were also endless tourist-oriented shops, lots of antique stores, bookshops, boutiques, and art galleries; and more coffee bars and pastry shops than I could count.



**Greenwich High Street**

If the previous paragraphs sound a bit sarcastic, don't get me wrong. I really liked Greenwich. It's a lovely place. I just got the feeling it's not a place where real people actually live. **[A lot of people do live in Greenwich, but they're the same people who live in Manhattan—extremely wealthy people.]** It actually reminded me a lot of the French Quarter in New Orleans (though it's cleaner than the Big Easy ever was—even before the hurricane). It's definitely tourist central, but there's a reason for it.



**View from the trail to the Royal Observatory – Greenwich  
(Canary Wharf is at center and the Millennium Dome at the right)**

We made our way east of downtown and past the University of Greenwich and on to Greenwich Park, home of the Royal Naval and Maritime Museum and the Royal Observatory. The observatory is at the top of one of the few major hills in what is really a very flat city **[London really is amazingly flat]**, and we had a major hike getting up there. The trail offers some panoramic views of Canary Wharf, the Millennium Dome, and central Greenwich, plus lots and lots of decaying industrial areas.

At the gate to the observatory an old man told us we would need to go to the ticket window to get tickets. The tickets turned out to be free, and I still don't know why they make you **[go elsewhere to]** get them. I would think the guy at the gate could just keep track of how many people entered with a counter. We showed him our tickets and made our way through into the courtyard.

The one thing every tourist who visits the observatory has to see is the Prime Meridian, the 0° longitude line that divides the Eastern and Western Hemispheres. Like every tourist we snapped pictures of ourselves straddling the line, with one foot in the east and one in the west. It's about as exciting as the Four Corners, though in a more pleasant setting. They also have a machine where for a pound you can purchase a certificate verifying that you were here. I put money into the machine, but it jammed. Fortunately the man at the gate came over and rescued us, so it wasn't like the tube candy machines. He even gave us sort of a two for one deal, getting out certificates for both Margaret and me.

There are two other things to see in the courtyard of the observatory. One is the master clock for Greenwich Mean Time (technically called Coordinated Universal Time, or UTC). This 19<sup>th</sup> Century clock is really quite strange because it has twenty-four numbers on it instead of the usual twelve. The other thing we saw was a "camera obscura" or darkened room where they illustrated the techniques that the early astronomers used to observe the heavens. Basically a mirror projects an image into the darkened room. They had it set up so we could see people passing by on the trail up to the observatory. At first I thought it was an image from a security camera, but it really was just an image from a mirror.



**Royal Observatory – Greenwich**

We also went inside the observatory itself and up to its dome. They have displays of antique astronomical instruments, though I can't say any of them was particularly memorable. The exit to the observatory was through one of the most expensive gift shops I've ever seen. I chose to pass on the £8.50 (\$14.90) coffee mugs (though Margaret got one), and I didn't even consider the reproductions of observatory instruments for truly "astronomical" prices.

We made our way back downhill to the maritime museum, where again we had to go to one person to get a free ticket that we then presented to another person. (This must be Job Centre Plus' new scheme for fighting unemployment.) This is an enormous museum where we could easily have spent hours. We didn't really want to devote that kind of time, so we picked a few things and called that good. Margaret was really far more interested in the place than I was (she has an amazing knowledge of what to me seemed obscure maritime history), so we mostly saw what she wanted to see. We saw an exhibit called "Exploring the Coast" that detailed the voyages of explorers who first mapped the world's coasts. We also saw two clocks (H1 and H4) that were first used to establish longitude on board ships, a major advancement in navigation. The final exhibit we saw was called "Making Waves". Intended mostly for children, it was an interactive exhibit that told how all types of ocean waves form and travel. We wanted to see an exhibit on Admiral Nelson, but it had apparently just closed at Christmas. **[I have to say I remember almost nothing of the maritime museum. It's probably good the place was free.]**

By the time we left the museum the tube strike was scheduled to begin. We could have taken the DLR back downtown (not technically being part of the tube—and not having station personnel for that matter—the strike would not affect it), but we weren't sure if we could get from Bank or Tower Gateway on to anywhere else. So we made our way toward the Greenwich national rail station, which would connect with other train stations around the city.

The Greenwich train station is at the south end of downtown Greenwich, and we walked through more gentrification to get there. We passed Greenwich market, which seems to feature mostly antiques, and a tapas bar that Margaret scoffed at because it was far more pretentious than the Spanish establishments it attempted to copy **[though it would fit right in with the tapas bars that are proliferating around America]**. (Tapas, by the way, started at about £8 or \$14, and prices went up to £26 or \$45.50 a plate—for what are essentially single servings of appetizers. The accompanying drinks were a minimum of £6 or \$10.50 more.)

We got a lesson in just how frequent British trains are when we got to the station. We just missed a train when we arrived, but our wait for the next one would be only ten minutes. That's about the most frequent interval they have on most public transit in America, and this was a "long distance" (by British standards) train that came all the way from Canterbury. (Even on its most frequent routes, Amtrak has at best hourly service—and this was a weekend to boot.) It wasn't as frequent as the tube service, but we certainly couldn't complain. We just had time to buy a bag of "crisps" from the platform kiosk before the next train arrived.

The car we boarded was virtually empty. While they go a fair distance, South Eastern Trains basically operate a commuter service, and Saturday at midday is definitely not their peak operating time. We sat down, and the train pulled out of the station. No conductor ever came by to look for our travelcard. We could have easily made the trip for free. **[Given how empty the trains are, it really does seem silly to have such frequent weekend service.]**

The train followed the south bank of the Thames westward from Greenwich. While it was interesting to be above ground and be able to see what was around us, I can't say the view was exactly inspirational. We mostly saw warehouses and "council estates" (housing projects). I think there's as many public housing towers in London as there are in New York or Chicago. They're in slightly better shape than their American counterparts, but only slightly. I got the feeling that the people who staff all the chic shops and trendy restaurants in Greenwich probably live here.

Our train trip lasted less than ten minutes, with two intermediate stops. Our destination was London Bridge Station, a major rail terminal on the south bank of the Thames in the borough of Southwark (SUTH-ik, with a hard "TH" like in "that"). The exit here was strange. They had turnstiles, but there was no actual barrier. I'm not sure if we were supposed to somehow scan our travelcard (which you always do when exiting the tube) or not. We just went right on through, probably being caught on camera jumping the turnstiles. No one bothered to stop our anti-social behavior, though, and we just made our way out of the station.

There's an underground station at London Bridge as well as a rail terminal, and we were pleasantly surprised to see that the tube's electronic information sign said that all lines were operating "NORMAL SERVICE" in spite of the strike. We hoped that would continue. TfL advised travelers to check the internet for regular updates on the status of each line. That was impossible for us to do, but we did know that at least for now things were operating.

Getting out of London Bridge station was confusing, and this turned out to be yet another time we made a wrong turn on exiting a station and ended up somewhere completely different than we had intended. The streets actually are signed pretty well in Southwark, but they seem to change their name for no good reason about every block, so it's hard to know exactly where the one you want is. We were looking for a specific address on Tooley Street, and it was no help that virtually none of the buildings had addresses on them. I would hate to be a fireman or an ambulance driver here; I don't know how they'd ever find the places that called them.

We ended up going west when we should have gone east, but our detour did show us some sights we otherwise might not have seen. We saw Southwark Cathedral (which actually serves a larger diocese than St. Paul's) and the fascinating remains of the original London Bridge. **The** London Bridge, of course, is now in Arizona. It was purchased, hauled halfway around the world, and re-assembled as the centerpiece of a British-themed tourist attraction in the desert. There's a bridge called London Bridge today, but it's a modern bridge with pretty much nothing noteworthy about it. (The ornate bridge many tourists think is London Bridge is actually Tower Bridge.) The anchorage of the old bridge still stands in Southwark, though, and it's an enormous structure. In fact it's so big that there's a pub located inside it. It really was a fascinating thing to see.



**Entrance to Britain at War Museum**  
it—and "liberal" Tony Blair too, for that matter.

After realizing we'd headed the wrong way, we retraced our steps to the station and then walked east. Before long we reached our next destination, Winston Churchill's Britain at War Experience. The museum is supposedly located in an actual underground air raid shelter, which is probably part of the London Bridge station complex. We paid our admission (£7 or \$12.25 each, and that was the discounted price with a £1.50 coupon I'd printed out online) and "called a lift" to take us to the main part of the museum.

While not really worth its admission price (except for the freebies, nothing was), this was a fascinating museum. They start with a mock-up of a tube platform lined with bunks. Many London families spent virtually every night of the war in the tube stations, seeking shelter from German bombs. It fascinated me that the emergency shelters operated like a business. People actually leased specific bunks for themselves and their families. **[Space on the floors was available free of charge.]** Maggie Thatcher would have loved

The bunk area is where they show their orientation film, a lengthy presentation that explains World War II from a British point of view. That was also fascinating. We always hear the war presented from an American perspective. I hadn't really realized, for

instance, that British troops fought in the Pacific. Much of the film used actors reading from journals of people who lived through the war. It was funny to me that they used voices appropriate to the materials they were reading. Most of the diaries were from British people, but when they read the words of Americans or Australians, they used people with the appropriate accents to read them.

The rest of the museum displays artifacts that show what life was like for various types of people in England during the war. Some of the things (like rationing and the evacuation of children from the city) I was aware of, but the museum made them more real for me. There were other things I hadn't realized, like the fact that everyone in London was issued a gas mask and expected to carry it with them at all times. Perhaps most interesting, though, were the many stories of how people in the city tried to carry on as close to normal as possible during those incredibly abnormal times.

For no reason I can figure out, the World War II Museum had just about the cheapest gift shop in London. While the Prime Meridian coffee mugs cost a small fortune, here they had souvenir mugs for just £1.99 (\$3.48). Other things were similarly affordable. The other gift shops and the city in general could certainly take lessons from this place. **[I've wondered at many gift shops just how they set their prices. Most souvenirs cost essentially nothing, and I've often thought they'd sell more if they made the stuff more affordable.]**

We walked back past the station and on down Borough High Street, the main drag of Southwark. In addition to the same shops we'd seen everywhere from Camden to Morden, they had yet another market. It would have been fun to browse through all the markets (which seem to be everywhere in London), but we really didn't have a lot of free time for that. We just gave a quick glance and walked on by.

Our final destination in Southwark was the Brahmah Museum of Coffee and Tea. The Brahmahs are a family of tea traders, and the current patriarch of the family has opened a fascinating museum about the cultivation and distribution of hot beverages and the implements with which they are prepared. The museum is housed in a rather ugly green building from the '50s just off the quaint looking high street. We paid our admission (£4 or \$7 each) and made our way through the place. While it's not especially well displayed (cramped and cluttered would be good descriptions), the museum gives a most encyclopedic treatment of its subject matter.

They begin with tea, differentiating all the different kinds, and tracing the history of the drink through Asia and into Europe. They talk about the importance of tea in British culture and describe the place of the drink in the formation of the British Empire. The various political conflicts that have developed because of the drink are explored in depth. They also show the processes by which tea is cultivated, shipped, and processed. Then they display an enormous collection of teapots, samovars, china service, tea cosies, and anything else that might be associated with making or serving tea.

The coffee exhibit is equally comprehensive. They begin in pre-colonial Africa, where the raw beans were made into a pulp and eaten as a protein-rich food. It was later a fermented drink and almost accidentally came to be the drink we know today. As with tea, they describe the cultivating and processing of coffee (which is actually more complicated, because of the roasting). Then they display hundreds of inventions that have been used to brew coffee over the years. Surprisingly, the one thing neither Margaret nor I found in their enormous collection was a traditional percolator. I'm not sure, given their affinity for instant, if percolators were ever common in Britain. On the other hand, they had some very strange Italian and French brewing machines (that looked more like implements of torture than kitchen appliances), so I'd think an American stand-by would be an appropriate addition to the collection.

I had made a reservation ahead of time to have afternoon tea at the museum's café. While this was a much more institutional experience than the tea Margaret and I had in San Francisco a few years back, it was pleasant. We had assam tea, cucumber sandwiches, sultana scones with clotted cream and strawberry jam, and lemon cake. The café was open and noisy, but a pianist played carols in the background, providing a soothing touch. It was interesting that while we had our tea, the



**ABOVE: Gas mask at Britain at War Experience  
BELOW: Brewing equipment from Brahmah Coffee & Tea Museum (Website photos)**



proprietor of the museum was also having tea a couple tables down from us. The meal was definitely not worth its £9 price tag (\$15.75—each), but when in London one must uphold those British traditions.

The man who greeted us when we entered the museum (the owner's son, I think) told us we needn't have worried about making reservations for tea. He expected that on New Year's Eve, especially with the tube strike, there likely would be almost no one there. As it turned out, the place wasn't full, but there was a fair number of people. The Brahmah Museum had a very extensive gift shop. I picked up some coffee from Ethiopia and some from Kenya, as well as a book on coffee makers that was being cleared. Margaret bought a teapot for a friend of hers, as well as a few other souvenirs.

Since the tube had been operating earlier, we figured it was worth our while to see if we could take it back to the hotel. (If not, I had my train and bus schedules with me.) We walked underground and carefully checked out all the signs. The electronic crawl vaguely said that some stations and parts of stations were closed, without specifying which those might be. A handwritten sign by the turnstiles said "good service" was operating on all but one line, the Northern Line. For the line we wanted they said there were "minor delays due to staff shortages". We noticed there was no one working in the ticket booth and no one monitoring the security cameras at London Bridge station, but we figured we might as well take our chances and see if we could get back.

We made our way through the turnstiles and down to the Northern Line platform. Almost immediately a train entered the station. It was fairly crowded, but we got on board and managed to get seats. Before we left the station the driver announced in an apologetic tone that "due to staff shortages, we regret to announce that the next station, Borough, is closed. This train will not be stopping at Borough." While I don't know exactly how they relate to the streets in the area, underground it seems that Borough and London Bridge are very close together. If they were attempting to re-distribute staff to allow the line to run efficiently, closing Borough seemed a good choice to me.

Borough was one of three closed stations we encountered on our trip. The driver made apologetic announcements that "due to the industrial action" (the euphemism for strike) Clapham North and Clapham South were also closed. As with Borough, both of these were fairly close to another station—in this case Clapham Common—so they still managed to get service to the neighborhood even if not all the stations were open. I hoped this would continue as we went south, so that if Colliers Wood happened to be closed we could at least get to Tooting or South Wimbledon and walk from there. (I don't know, but if I were to guess, I'd imagine they'd close South Wimbledon first among the stations in our area; it seemed the least important to me.)

It was fascinating to go through the closed stations. We would slow down, but then keep on going. The lights were still on in the stations, and they had a sign on the reverse side of the tube map that normally was displayed on the wall of each station. The sign popped out so it was perpendicular to the wall. It had obviously been prepared in advance and was permanently mounted there, said "STATION CLOSED – 5 MPH".

There was no question that Colliers Wood station was open. Lots of people left the train here, and when we made our way up the escalator we could see that the ticket window, the security booth, and even the passenger assistance window were all staffed. There were in fact, four different employees working here who were all supposed to be on strike.



**Website photo of a pop-out "Station Closed" sign in the London underground**

I read a lot about the strike after I got back home, and Margaret and I can probably thank the union leader for much of our good fortune. Apparently right after announcing that his members would be striking New Year's Eve, the union boss went off to Egypt on holiday. Much of the rank and file was irate at being asked to strike (and lose the overtime pay they'd have gotten for working on the holiday) while their leader was sunning himself on an African beach. More than half of the union members showed up for work (as did the one-third of employees who aren't union members), which is why most service continued to operate fairly normally over the holiday. I'm writing this January 7, and they're supposed to have another strike next week. It will be interesting to see whether that one actually happens. (*Update:* I finished and revised this right after the second strike was scheduled. It also was pretty much a non-event, with only one line affected in any serious way. It would seem that the union boss should be reconsidering his tactics.)

By the way, the matter the union was striking over seems silly and petty to almost everyone except them. Basically they were trying to get out of a contract they'd already agreed to—and one that was a pretty good deal, too. The new contract provides them with a 35-hour work week and an increase in pay. The thing they don't like, though, is that some of the workers will be moved out of ticket booths and re-deployed on the platforms. As they go to mostly electronic fare collection, the job of ticket-seller is becoming pretty much irrelevant. They're not actually laying anyone off **[though they do, of course, hope to reduce staff through retirements and attrition]**, but they're changing their jobs to something that would be more productive in modern times. Chicago did that years ago, and New York's in the process of making the switch now. **[New York in particular still seems to have far more transit employees than they really need.]** The union in London (which, remember, already agreed to this change) has now decided that they don't want their members to have to change jobs. What it sounds like to me is that they've figured out that they've got it pretty cushy sitting on their lazy "arses" in the ticket cages, and down on the platforms they might have to actually do something. I can't say that I'm exactly weeping for them.

It was about 4:00 when we got back to the hotel. There was still a bit of light, so we decided to explore the little park in back of the hotel. We went in to Wandle Park and admired an enormous object near the entrance that was basically a drinking fountain. No sooner had we done that than a guard from the Merton Council came up to tell us the park was closed. He had already locked the gate through which we entered, so we had to leave another way. Can you imagine a park in America closing at 4pm? Even if it gets dark early, I'd expect people to be jogging or just enjoying the area into the evening. That was definitely not the case here, though. In fact, there weren't even any streetlights in the park, which would tend to make it a pretty creepy place once it was truly dark.

Failing in our attempt to explore Wandle Park, we next tried to find the ruins of Merton Priory, which we had read could be seen in a pedestrian underpass (a "subway") between Savacentre (now Sainsbury's) and a Pizza Hut at the Metron Abbey Mills shopping centre. We hadn't seen a Pizza Hut yet, but we figured if we circled Sainsbury's gigantic perimeter, we'd sooner or later come to it. We made our way past the Colliers Wood parish church (which still had a banner advertising their Christmas Day services) and the far side of the tower and soon came to one of Colliers Wood's many shopping centers (or "retail parks" as the highway signs say). There was a path that looked like it might lead to an underpass, so we followed it.

The path turned out to be part of the Wandle Trail, a twelve-mile-long path that winds its way through much of southern London. The nature trail follows the Wandle River, which in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century was the most polluted waterway on earth. The Wandle has several gentle waterfalls that in Victorian times were perfect for powering industry. Hundreds of factories lined the Wandle banks all the way from Croydon to Southwark, and they all spewed their effluent into the river. Pretty much all of those factories are now closed now (part of Merton Abbey Mills is housed in a former factory building), and the river has been cleaned up to the point where it's now safe to fish. We hiked just a tiny part of the trail, which basically ran along the back side of a shopping center. We had just a tiny glimpse of the river, which looked like an overgrown creek. **[Except for tidal estuaries like the Thames, "rivers" in Britain are rather small.]**

We made our way back the way we'd come and crossed through the parking lot of the Tandem Retail Centre, which looks like one of those shopping centers that springs up across the street from a Wal-Mart in America. Just past here is a roundabout where the motorway to Brighton begins. We crossed the street and walked along the south side of Sainsbury's, which has a separate open-air parking lot here, in addition to the ramp they have at the bottom of their building. There's a "petrol" station at one end of the parking lot, and they were doing a brisk business on New Year's Eve.

Before long we found a pedestrian underpass that had to be the one we'd read about. Painted bright red, it is brightly lit by graffiti-covered fluorescent lamps. There's a plaque that explains the history of the priory and says that the excavated ruins "can be seen in the windows" on the other side of the underpass. Unfortunately the lights in the tunnel were so bright that we could see nothing but their reflection in those windows. At least we found the place, though. **[If they'd just move the lights behind the windows they could both light the underpass and show off the ruins. In that location, the lights would be unlikely to be vandalized, too.]**

There was indeed a Pizza Hut on the other side of the tunnel. There was also a KFC **[which often is located near Pizza Hut, since they're owned by the same company]** and a Travel Inn hotel with a health club in it. There was nothing much to capture our interest, so we made our way back to our hotel.

We began packing our bags while watching Sky TV news. The big story was that Russia was threatening to cut off natural gas pipelines to Europe because of disputes they were having with Ukraine. Almost all of Europe's gas comes from Russia, and prices (which had already spiked due to the cold) were expected to skyrocket. The reporters noted that until quite recently Britain was self-sufficient in gas and in fact exported it. Apparently the North Sea supplies are running dry, though, so they're dependent on Russia like the rest of Europe.

There was also a lot of coverage of the tube strike. At this point no one really seemed to know just how big the strike was or whether it was having a significant effect or not. The union and TfL (who had a spokesperson with a very American accent) told completely opposite stories, and the reporters didn't seem to know what to make of it. They predicted that the combination of the strike and increased ASBO (i.e. public intoxication) enforcement would lead to far fewer revelers downtown tonight.

Much of the other news was related to the New Year. Again and again we saw the same clip from Australia, where Sydney had welcomed in 2006 with heart-shaped fireworks. They also went to Greenwich to explain that a "leap second" would be added to the year at 11:59:59 as a way of keeping our clocks in line with what the earth was actually doing.

Featuring prominently in the news were Her Majesty's New Year's honors, the queen's annual list of people that the prime minister wishes to have inducted into the Order of the British Empire, the upper levels of which constitute knighthood. We heard over and over again that the entire British national cricket team (which had defeated Australia to win the world championship) was receiving O.B.E. honors, which pretty much everyone thought was ridiculous. Much more appropriate were the honors going to the emergency personnel who responded to the terrorist bombings on the tube last July.

**[Having mentioned Brian May earlier, I should point out that he was named a Commander of the British Empire in the 2005 honors (not the ones announced tonight, but the previous year's list). Like many entertainers, the reason for his honor was "services to the music industry". Commander is the third highest level of O.B.E. honors. It's one step shy of knight hood, so unlike Elton John and Paul McCartney, Dr. May can not be addressed as "Sir".]**

When the news got repetitive we switched through channels and came upon the British version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* They were doing a special edition for the holidays, with pairs of celebrities working together to earn money for charity. The first twosome exhausted their lifelines and then bowed out on a £32,000 question that I thought was easy:

Which of these is not a letter of the Greek alphabet?

- |    |         |    |      |
|----|---------|----|------|
| A. | gamma   | C. | meta |
| B. | epsilon | D. | chi  |

The answer, by the way, is "meta". As a math teacher I deal with the Greek alphabet a lot. Americans also see Greek letters in the names of fraternities and sororities all the time. Margaret tells me such organizations don't exist in Britain **[though other sources lead me to believe they do]**, so perhaps that makes this a harder question there.

The next group to come on included Sebastian Coe, someone I know for setting records at the Olympics back in the '80s. He went on to become the lone Tory member of Parliament from East London (like being a Republican from the Bronx) and is now Lord Coe, the Baron of Somewhere or other. He's in the news now as the person who chaired London's bid to host the 2012 Olympics. "Seb" (as the host called him) was accompanied by a blonde bimbo whose claim to fame appeared to be that she was a trained tightrope walker. The two did quite well together. She knew things a blonde bimbo might know (like the fact that "georgette" is a kind of fabric), and he knew everything else. I, on the other hand, would have missed their £100 question, which was about some apparently well-known British celebrity. The only question they struggled on as they made their way to a £125,000 (more than \$200,000) payoff was what creatures are killed by "vermicide". Margaret knew immediately that it was worms, apparently from a related word in German. I would have guessed that, simply by thinking of "vermin". The celebs, though, went through all three lifelines on that question alone. Eventually Coe just made a guess and said he'd pay the charity the difference from his own pocket if it was wrong.



**Kiss Me Hardy in Colliers Wood  
(from the website [beerfinder.com](http://beerfinder.com))**

For dinner tonight we decided to go to a place located in an ugly brick box between the Colliers Wood Burger King and Carphone Warehouse. Named Kiss Me Hardy, this was a fascinating place. It was part of a chain of pubs, a concept that just doesn't exist in America **[though that's more or less what Applebee's is]**. The chain is actually called 2-for-1, a play on two aspects of their format. First they offer two business establishments. In addition to the pub, they also have "Wacky Warehouse", an upstairs playland where "mum" can leave her offspring while she and "pop" are downstairs getting snookered. Also their meals are priced on a two-for-one basis. For each main course you order, you get a second main course free. This was actually the perfect place for us. Not only was it cheap, but as a chain it provided a very user-friendly way for us to experience the pub atmosphere.

Written instructions at the entrance directed us to seat ourselves and order at the bar. We found a pleasant table and looked over their laminated menu. They had a very broad range of cuisine. In addition to traditional British foods, they had main courses from other European and from several Asian countries. I chose to have lasagna, while Margaret had tikka chicken. She had wanted to have a lamb dish, but the "publican"

told her they no longer served that. The lasagna came with mixed greens and garlic bread, while the curry was accompanied by a choice of noodles or rice and na'an bread. I didn't have anything to drink (which earned an odd look from the bartender), but Margaret had a glass of the house red wine. She got an enormous wine glass that was actually marked with etching on the glass for precisely where her 250ml serving should top off. The two main courses together were £7.95 (\$13.90) **[incredibly cheap by British standards]**, and I think the wine was another £3.25 (\$5.65).

My lasagna was interesting. I expect Italian food to have a bite and be full of spices like basil, oregano, and garlic. This had a brown-colored sauce and was one of the blandest foods I've ever tasted. I doctored it up with pepper and malt vinegar, which made it good, but it was hospital cuisine as originally presented. (I gather Margaret's curry, on the other hand, was quite spicy.) By the way, it didn't occur to me until after the fact that I had ordered a beef dish in the land of mad cow disease. My bet is they've got more stringent standards than we do these days, though. **[Indeed they are.]**

As we waited for our food we had fun looking over Kiss Me Hardy's kiddy menu. Printed in bright colors and laminated, they served a fascinating combination of foods, all served on bright blue triangular plates. It's hard to think of the traditional "bangers and mash" (sausages atop mashed up root vegetables) as appealing to the tots, but you could get it for £2.95 (\$5.15). They also had classic British items like shepherd's pie, plus immigrant-inspired items like curried rice. For "pudding" the kids could get ice cream, a classic British trifle (layered "jelly", cake, and custard) or a pre-packaged bag of fruit—something I doubt any kid would willingly select.

It was fun to people-watch at Kiss Me Hardy. Most of the folks here were small groups of middle-aged people who were enjoying a quieter New Year's Eve than most of the pubs were offering. (The Colliers Tup next to our hotel, for instance, was celebrating the New Year with a Caribbean theme.) They were combining dinner with several rounds of drinks and seemed to be enjoying themselves without getting to a stage that might put them in the "ASBO" category. There was also a black family with several well-dressed children who seemed to be having a special family dinner. Among the most interesting was an elderly couple who were in the restaurant part of the pub together with their grandson. When they'd finished dinner, they announced to the boy that it was time to go home and to bed and congratulated him on "your first time gone pubbing".

After dinner we went over to the Tesco convenience store across from the station. Calling it a convenience store is really an understatement, though. While the main purpose of the place is to sell Esso-brand petrol, they manage to contain a full supermarket in an amazingly small space. Prices were higher than they would be at home, but more reasonable than a lot of other things we had bought. I bought some strangely flavored juice and some snack foods to eat on the plane.

Both Margaret and I also bought some Oxo-brand bullion (35p or 60¢ for six cubes). Oxo is a British company that was once headquartered in a building called the Oxo tower, which is one of the landmarks we'd seen on the cruise two days ago. When the building was constructed advertising was forbidden on the sides of buildings. (It's omnipresent today.) To get around the law, Oxo built ornate windows on its tower shaped like the letters "OXO". A long legal fight followed, with Oxo arguing that since churches were allowed to have windows in those shapes, they should be allowed to have them too. That these simple geometric shapes could be interpreted as letters of the alphabet was irrelevant. They won their case, and while they're no longer headquartered in central London, the tower still stands today. The bullion was probably my cheapest and definitely one of my most interesting souvenirs.

There were a lot of other fascinating items for sale at Tesco, including an almost wider selection of convenience foods than you'd find in an American grocery. There were convenience versions of all the British stand-bys: frozen steak and kidney pie, microwave fish and chips, boil-in-bag jellied eels, Cornish pasties for the toaster oven, and pre-packaged trifle in a "handy disposable serving dish". They also sold frozen or irradiated versions of ethnic foods from around the world. I actually considered buying the trifle (a parfait of sponge cake, gelatin, fruit, and custard), but it was enough to feed an army—far more than Margaret and I wanted. I suppose we must have similar foods in America. I just don't buy them, because they cost too much. **[I happened to look around the frozen department at Hy-Vee a couple weeks ago. I was amazed at some of the frozen items I never knew existed, and even more amazed to see prices I'd never even consider (in some cases as much as \$20).]** I'm not sure if Londoners think they're expensive or not. They seemed pricey to me, but less so than the city's restaurant food.

We had originally thought about trying to go to Watch Night services at City Road Chapel. Still not knowing whether the tube was working right or whether it would continue to run after midnight, we decided we'd be wise to just stay in Colliers Wood. **[We almost certainly could have made it there and back without a problem, but I'm honestly glad we didn't go.]** We spent most of the rest of New Year's Eve watching the "tele". Most interesting was a feature on ITV about the "best" (a word they used loosely) British commercials of the past fifty years. Many of them featured that British humor I never quite seem to get, but others were quite interesting. It's fascinating that, unlike the products themselves, almost none of the commercials we see are shown globally. There were only two I recognized from American TV. One, which was identical to what we saw in America, was the famous Coke commercial from the '70s with people from around the world singing "I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony..." The other was a commercial that was similar to one that aired in America, but featured a different cast. It was a Levi's commercial set in a laundromat (or "launderette" as the Brits say) where a young man takes off his jeans and puts them in the washer as prudish-looking girls watch him strip. I think the script for the American and British versions of this ad was probably identical, but the actors were completely different.

By staying in Colliers Wood, we got an unexpected New Year's treat. As the TV showed us people ringing in the New Year in Moscow and Berlin, we started seeing fireworks outside our hotel window. Around 10:15 they started setting off fireworks across Wandle Park in Wimbledon. Then, shortly before midnight, every neighborhood in London seemed to get into the act. From our window we could see fireworks in Wimbledon, Morden, and some neighborhood west of Tooting. There were also fireworks in Colliers

Wood, and I think they were setting them off right on the roof of our hotel. We could barely make them out looking straight up. **[I've never really thought of fireworks as a New Year's tradition, since in the American Midwest the weather doesn't really lend itself to celebrating outdoors. Fireworks seem to be a big deal in many places, though.]**

We watched the New Year come in on TV, something I've done many times at home, though never when it was dinner time in Iowa. It was interesting that we could actually see the leap second before Big Ben rang in 2006. The big digital countdown they had in Trafalgar Square counted off 11:59:57, 11:59:58, 11:59:59, and then flashed 11:59:59 again before finally showing 12:00:00. **The Westminster Chimes, by the way, start playing about fifteen seconds before the hour, so the first stroke of midnight is right on the hour. The BBC dutifully played those chimes as we welcomed in the New Year. [It was weird to think that it was still early evening back in Iowa when we celebrated the year's start. I'm used to be nearly the last person on earth to ring in the year, well after those in Europe have done so.]**

They then showed the massive fireworks show at the London Eye (and an even bigger display up in Edinburgh). The reporters all declared that the tube strike had failed, since there appeared to be more people downtown celebrating than there were last year. They were hoping people could also get downtown tomorrow for the big New Year's parade.

We were also hoping we could travel without problems tomorrow, and I think we both said a little prayer to that effect as we headed off to bed.

## Sunday, January 1, 2006

We had set the alarm to go off shortly before 7:00. While our flight wasn't leaving until afternoon, if there were problems with the tube, we'd need that extra time to get to the airport—particularly on a holiday.

While neither of us was particularly cheery this morning, we certainly woke up quickly. That's because our shower had no hot water. This hadn't been a problem any other morning but today we had an icy "power shower".

We had the hotel breakfast and gathered up our stuff. Check-out was extremely quick, and I found out from the receipt that I'd been charged slightly less than the rate I'd actually booked. As we made our way to the station, Margaret paused for a moment to photograph the sign in front of the Colliers Twp. It said "OVES OPTIMAE SUNT", which she tells me means in Latin "Ewes the best". I'm not sure if that's supposed to be a pun or if they serve good lamb, but it is an interesting sign. (I found out later that the same motto appears on "Twp" signs all over Britain.) **[In doing this revision, I found that "twp" is a synonym for a ram. The term is also apparently archaic British slang for "to have intercourse", which I suppose rams and ewes might do. Both the name and the Latin motto still seem rather strange, though.]**

Colliers Wood station was open, with at least two employees working this morning. However the sign by the turnstiles made it clear things weren't running quite so smoothly as they had been yesterday. There was a long list of closed stations (forty in all, I found out later). Most worrisome was that among these was Stockwell, the place we were intending to transfer to the Victoria Line that runs straight to Victoria Station. We made our way down to the platform anyway. I figured if worse came to worse, we could surely find at least one open station somewhere in the downtown area. From there, if not from Colliers Wood, we might be able to afford a cab to the station.

They announced at Tooting Broadway that Tooting Bec station was closed. When we got to Tooting Bec the "5 MPH" sign was popped out of the wall, but we proceeded to actually stop in the station. The driver opened the doors and announced, "We have just received word that Tooting Bec is now open." That was a fascinating turn of events.

**Many** stations were closed, though, far more than had been yesterday. (Apparently forty of the 200+ stations in the system were shut down at the peak of the strike.) When we got to Kennington, a major station where the two downtown branches of the Northern Line split, we heard an announcement from the platform speakers saying that station would be closing immediately and no further trains would be stopping. Many people had just left our train and were now, presumably, trying frantically to figure out how to reach their destinations.

The car we were traveling in this morning was very dirty. It made me wonder if people who might ordinarily be cleaning the cars had been reassigned to work in stations. I found out later that wasn't the case, which makes me wonder why an early morning train would be so filthy. **[Most likely it was just from the tube's being open all night and transported holiday revelers home from their celebrations. They probably do most of their cleaning in the wee hours, but they were unable to do so this particularly day.]**

We took the Northern Line to Bank station, which—thank the Lord—was open. It's such a major transfer station that it almost has to be open if the tube is operating, but when Stockwell and Kennington were closed, I wondered. With all the closed stations, we made the trip downtown in record time. We made our way up to the District Line, where we boarded an ancient car with a wooden floor, something I don't think fire codes would permit in America these days. **[Such vehicles aren't allowed to travel underground in America, but many are used in heritage trolley systems at street level.]** I was worried again when we passed Cannon Street, which sits beneath a national rail terminal. That station was closed, but the next station (something irrelevant that didn't even have an

interchange) was open—with not a single person on the platform. I had assumed that, being a national rail terminal, Victoria would probably be open, but now I started to wonder.

More thanksgiving, Victoria was indeed open. In fact, it seemed as busy as if it were a business day. We exited the tube train quickly and made our way upstairs to the rail terminal. We found Platform 14, from which the Gatwick Express departs, quickly and boarded the train. This time it was much more crowded than when we had come. Lots of people were aboard, and they all seemed to be carrying huge amounts of luggage. Several of the bags struck me as things that would be over the standard airline limits for checked baggage, but everyone was taking them to the airport. Margaret and I had both traveled quite light on this trip. I don't always take as little as I had now, but I don't think I've ever taken as much stuff as some of these people did. It made me wonder just what people find to put in a bag the size of a steamer trunk.

The ride back to Gatwick was uneventful. The three main things I noticed were Nestle's British headquarters in Croydon, a mobile home park just outside the greenbelt (I didn't know anyone other than the U.S. had "trailer trash", but I guess Britain does too), and the absolutely empty M-25 motorway that forms the outer belt of London. We had a long wait just outside Gatwick station, but managed to arrive precisely at the scheduled time (which is five minutes later on Sundays than any other day of the week).

Unlike American airports, where each airline has its own desk with its name above it, at Gatwick you're supposed to find your flight on a TV and then check-in at the designated area. The TV told us that NW31 was to check in at Area H. While there was no Northwest sign at the desk, it was clear from the fact that there was an electronic Northwest check-in kiosk there, that this is always the area they use. I swiped my credit card (which they require as identification) and pressed a few buttons to indicate we wanted to check in. They asked me to swipe my passport, but gave no indication as to what exactly I was supposed to do. Eventually a guard showed me. I figured the machine would read either a barcode or a magnetic strip, but it doesn't. Actually there's print at the bottom that apparently an optical character reader can read. When I swiped the passport, it quickly showed me on the screen all the information it contained. I verified that it was correct, and it printed my boarding pass. Unfortunately, when it came time for Margaret to swipe her passport, the machine wouldn't read it. Her passport was a bit bent, and I suppose it goofed up the optics a bit. The clerk at the desk had a different machine, and that one read the passport with no problem. She gave Margaret a traditional cardboard ticket (while I had a laser-printed ticket from the machine), told us our gate number, and informed us it would be a twenty-minute walk to get there.

Not far beyond the check-in area was security, where there was a long, **long** line. We walked back and back looking for the end. At one point the line was broken by an electric cart that was hauling garbage around the terminal. I got greedy and attempted to butt in line (knowing full well this wasn't really the end). A proper British gentleman politely said, "No mate, the queue starts back there, eh?" For as long as it was, the line moved amazingly fast. That's because the single queue to check our boarding passes (where, by the way, I confused the attendant by having my receipt rather than my boarding pass on top) split into about twenty different security checkpoints. In America we'd split that up into several different lines, each of which seemed shorter than this one, but the actual process would probably take about the same amount of time.

It intrigued me that the sex of people working at security was exactly the opposite of what it normally is in America. At home we usually have men watching the X-ray machines and women keeping the line moving. Here it was the other way around. A man thanked me as I put my keys and belt into the tub saying, "that's the way, mate", and a woman stared at the monitor. Security in general struck me as slightly less intensive than it is in America these days. In particular they weren't at all concerned that people remove their shoes, something that's just routine at home anymore. They repeatedly announced that we should remove our coats, but to me that would seem to go without saying.

At any rate we made it through security easily and proceeded to find the gate. The woman at check-in hadn't exaggerated very much when she said it would be a twenty-minute walk—and that wasn't counting security. There's pretty much nothing convenient about Gatwick's gate layout, and we walked down hallway after hallway after hallway before finally coming to "South Satellite". At most large airports you'd do this on moving walkways or via a tram, but here we just hiked.

South Satellite has about twelve gates built in a circle. In the center of the circle are two of each sex of restroom, two of the same brand of restaurant, two identical duty free shops, and two small newsstands. I suppose in theory one restaurant, one duty-free, one newsstand, and one set of toilets serve half the gates, and the others serve the rest. I'd think they'd try for a bit more variety, though. It didn't take very long to circle the whole place, and seeing two clones of the same restaurant seemed a bit odd to me.

The restaurants, by the way, were called "Metro". We spent our last British money to have lunch there. I had a ham and mozzarella pannini (which automatically came with a bag of crisps), plus minestrone (which automatically came with part of a baguette, cut into about ten thin slices), and cocoa (made from a powdered mix, but with fresh cream, in the espresso machine). This all coast about £8 (\$14). The place advertised "the same prices you'll find on High Street", and that's probably right. Britain's normal prices are about the same as airport prices back home.

As we ate, we heard Virgin Atlantic endlessly paging the same three passengers who were late for a flight to Orlando. Several times they said that if those passengers did not show within five minutes, they would forfeit their seats. They made that same announcement for nearly half an hour, so it's apparently not quite the threat it seems. With the back-up at security and the long walk to the gates, it would certainly be easy for people to show up late. (By the way, Virgin had another flight to Orlando about an hour and a half later; it made me wonder just how much traffic there is on that route.)

We, on the other hand, were **very** early. The airline suggested we be at the airport three hours before departure time. Since we'd only had minimal problems with the tube, we actually arrived closer to four hours ahead of time. We had about three hours to kill in the very dull area by Gate 38. One at a time Margaret and I made our way to the duty free shop. She bought a teddy bear for her a friend of hers, and I bought a T-shirt with the tube map on it. Neither of those was the sort of thing that's really a bargain at duty-free, but shopping killed a bit of time. I also read more in the garbage book, and Margaret did some reading as well.

Eventually they began boarding. More precisely, they began **pre-boarding**—that is they announced that handicapped people, families, people in exit rows, and elite frequent flyer members were permitted to board. They never did announce that anyone else should board, but no one seemed to care. Before long there was a long line waiting to get on the plane, and they just processed everyone through. (They also didn't enforce the fact that there were supposed to be separate lines for business and economy classes; Margaret and I were actually in the business class line.)

We found our seats easily. This time we were about twelve rows further forward, but again in seats H and J. (That those non-consecutive letters should be side-by-side seems odd to me, but they are—and the other side of the plane has A and C beside each other.) Once again Margaret's seat had a box of electronic equipment blocking her legroom, though this time she said it was a little bit smaller. **[I think actually the plane was just a tad wider at this point, which made the seat more comfortable.]**

We left the gate five minutes ahead of schedule, but had a **very** long wait as we slowly backed out of the cul de sac. I had a wonderful view of the brick wall that separated us from the motorway and wondered who in his right mind would have built an airport with this design. **[Gatwick's set-up seems particularly odd given that it's really quite far out of London and that the gates are so far from the main terminal. I'd think they'd have sufficient space for easy plane movements, but they don't seem to.]** Once we finally got away from the gate area, we almost immediately took off and were on our way.

We had eaten a large lunch at Metro because the tickets indicated that the meal we would be served would be "dinner", the same meal we were served at 10pm on the trip over. In fact the main food we were served was lunch, and they served it shortly after take-off. The lunch was a pre-packaged portion of Uncle Ben's Sichuan chicken (I've never had a branded main course on a plane before), together with a very strange salad (potato slices the size of orange sections with mayonnaise on one side of a plate; with miniature green beans, peppers, onions, and seeds of some sort in a vinegar and oil dressing on the other, separated by cucumber slices and half a cherry tomato), a hard roll with sunflower oil spread, a huge chunk of white cheddar cheese with biscuits (crackers), a large dessert (a mixture of cake, custard, and chocolate fluff, covered with chocolate sauce), and a 125ml bottle of red wine.

In addition to the lunch, we were also served a snack shortly before landing. It consisted of more branded food, a pre-package pannini (though not pressed down like I expect such sandwiches to be). The sandwich had stewed vegetables on it, together with either a basil and mozzarella paste (my choice, and it was excellent) or a tiny piece of turkey (Margaret's). That was served together with one of those little ice cream cups you eat with a wooden spoon.

I got a kick out of our stewardess, a young black woman. Several times during the flight children would try to get past her cart as she brought food or drinks down the aisle. There was a small area just behind our row next to a toilet where they could just barely squeeze through, but any further forward, they'd have to wait. At one point the stewardess said, "We learn patience early, don't we" in the tone a kindergarten teacher might use. **[I'm always amazed at how many people attempt to use the aisles while the attendants are serving food and drink. If you've ever flown, you know that it's pretty much impossible to move until the food service is over, but lots of people never seem to learn that lesson.]**

The strangest among our fellow passengers was a woman with a British passport who sat one row in front of us and across the aisle in Seat G. She first stood out as strange because she wore a formal-looking outfit (jacket and miniskirt) made of fleece, together with black fishnet hose. She called more attention to herself by spending most of the flight walking around. I don't know when I've seen someone so active aboard a plane. Finally this woman stood out because she had apparently ordered a vegetarian meal (it seemed as if half the plane had special meals on this flight), but someone had goofed up and the meal had not been catered. As it turned out both the lunch and snack had vegetarian options as part of the normal choices (the basil pannini, for instance). That didn't seem good enough for the woman, though **[and it did include dairy, which she may not eat]**, who seemed like those people who were complaining to the Southwest employees on *Airline*. The stewardess was polite, but there really was nothing more she could do to accommodate the woman.

The flight was mostly uneventful. I finished the garbage book and noticed we were on track to land forty-five minutes early. That was good, since we had a fairly tight connection to make in Detroit. The pilot had announced that the flight attendants should prepare for landing, and we headed down. We soon aborted the landing and rose abruptly, though. Then we circled Detroit for quite some time. Eventually the pilot announced that a small plane had been too close in front to allow us to land. We eventually descended again, and we had a smooth landing but a rough taxi on a very bumpy runway. Yet again we had to wait for another plane to leave the gate before we could deplane. (That bothers me, particularly when there were several other nearby gates that could accommodate our plane.) They finally opened the doors about ten minutes after we were scheduled to arrive.

Immigration and customs are separate in Detroit, and there was a **long** line at immigration. This was not helped by the fact that lots of people seemed to ignore directions for U.S. citizens to go one direction and others to go another. The man in front of us had a British passport, as did several other people in the "U.S. ONLY" lanes.

We happened to select the slowest moving line of all. The immigration officer was a trainee, and he had his supervisor looking over his shoulder as he processed people. Needless to say, he was nothing if not thorough. In the time it took him to process one person, the Hispanic woman in the next lane had processed five.

While we waited a young white woman with a U.S. passport was called aside and taken into a separate room for further questioning. I can sort of understand why people from other countries might be called aside, but I really wondered what would make them give a young American the third degree. This was immigration, not customs, so it wasn't as if they would be suspecting her of smuggling something. They were just making it hard for her to enter her own country. She did eventually get through, but I still wonder what the deal was.

Both Margaret and I were processed quickly. Since we had only carry-on luggage, we proceeded straight to customs. Margaret had carefully itemized everything she had purchased, which is what the customs card says you should do. I put two categories "clothes" and "souvenirs" with approximate values for each and a grand total of \$90 I was bringing back. (The legal limit is now \$800.) The man didn't even look at my card, and he gave Margaret's a quick once-over and waved us—and everybody else—through in record time. It was almost as easy as the non-existent British customs.

We had to pass through security before being allowed to enter the main part of the airport. I'd never had that happen before, and I suspect it's something new since the 2001 terrorist incidents. While I'd think the heavily guarded customs area was just about the safest part of the airport, in theory someone have a weapon in their checked luggage that they claimed to go through customs. They might possibly transfer that weapon to their hand luggage before re-checking the bag the weapon had been in. There's a lot of speculation there, but it could conceivably happen—unlikely as it might be in a room full of police officers. At any rate, our stuff was once again X-rayed and we had to go through the metal detectors again too—this time with our shoes off. **[This is apparently now standard at all U.S. airports, for precisely the reasons I mentioned. One issue it has caused is that people who buy booze at the airport duty-free shops run into problems when they reach the security after customs. They enforce the same liquid rules as all security checkpoints, which means they won't let a bottle of booze or perfume go through. In some cases they'll let you check those items at security, but I've read that other times they just make people forfeit them.]**

Landing late and having that additional security made this a tighter connection than we wanted. We raced through the tunnel to Concourse B, from which our flight was scheduled to depart. As it turned out, we were among the first to get to the gate, but I wouldn't have wanted the connection to be much tighter.

There aren't a lot of food and beverage options on Concourse B at DTW. In fact the only place that was open was an Einstein Brothers bagel shop a couple gates down from ours. I figured I'd get some coffee, but that turned out to be quite an ordeal. While there were at least five employees in the place, only one of them actually seemed to be doing anything. I asked someone for coffee, and just about got my head bitten off with a lecture saying I should wait my turn with the one woman who was actually helping people. That took longer than it otherwise might have, because the man in front of me felt compelled to use his credit card for a 90¢ purchase. It went through, but it seemed to take forever. I'm not sure I knew you could use a credit card for such a trivial amount. **[I've since seen people frequently use plastic—most often debit cards—for amounts under a dollar. I've even done it myself when I had a gift card that didn't quite cover a complete purchase. It's kind of surprising that businesses allow that, because they pay a "swipe fee" for each card that is processed, and on a small amount the fee is likely to eat up any profit they have.]**

The woman who served me was also rude. (I think I would be too if so many of my co-workers were just standing around doing nothing.) I eventually got coffee for Margaret and me, though, and I brought it back to the gate. Soon afterwards a woman sat down across from us. After a minute she exclaimed, "David Burrow!" and came up to me. I didn't recognize this person, and she spoke to me again as if I should. I finally asked her who she was, and she seemed a bit perturbed to have to tell me. It turned out that she was Diane Kleinwebber, who was traveling with her husband Mike. I had worked with the Kleinwebbers years ago in community theatre. I knew Mike fairly well then (though not Diane), but I don't think I've seen either of them in over a decade. We had a pleasant, if forced, conversation. It certainly is a small world. **[Usually when I find myself talking to people who obviously know me, but who I don't recognize, the people in question are former students. This situation was actually even worse, since I spent much of the time in community theatre with my glasses off, which meant I couldn't really see the other actors. I've never been good with faces (particularly out of context), and it always bothers me when people don't introduce themselves. Diane is certainly not alone in just assuming everyone knows her, though.]**

The flight back to Des Moines was uneventful. Most noteworthy was the fact that for an "airlink" flight this was an amazingly large plane. It had enough room to actually accommodate large bags in the overhead bins, and they even had a small first class section at the front of the plane. We arrived at DSM right on time, and we quickly made our way to the exit.

There was almost no wait at all for a bus to the remote parking lot. Once again we had an overly chatty driver (I think that must be a job requirement), this time going on endlessly about the weather and about the various football games we'd missed while out of the country. We got to the parking lot quickly and were pleased that both our cars started up without a problem. We circled the lot more than once looking for the exit, but eventually we found it.

I had made a reservation at the airport Motel 6, knowing we'd likely be dead tired after our trans-Atlantic flight. After the easy check-in in Britain, getting a room here seemed like going through the Inquisition. I had to show identification and sign my life away and then give information on both Margaret's and my cars, all before the girl at the desk would give me a key. **[Motel 6 always does require identification. I think they enforce that rule, because they tend to get a more low-market crowd than many hotels.]**

It says something about the lodging expectations in different places that a motel that is at the bottom of American chains offered us a room that was in some ways superior room to what we had at Express by Holiday Inn in Britain. The room was larger, it had double beds instead of singles, it was heated and had adequate blankets, and the shower was better designed (closer to the “power” ideal they advertised in London). There’s nothing luxurious about Motel 6, but it was a perfectly acceptable room.

I made a quick call to Paul to let him know we’d gotten back okay. Then, even though it was still relatively early **[at least in the States]**, we both went quickly to bed. It was pushing 3am in London, and this had been a very long day.

## Monday, January 2, 2006

We were up around 6:30 this morning and enjoyed a much nicer shower than we’d had in Britain. I’ve always been impressed that Motel 6 can take a low-flow showerhead and actually manage to produce pressure. We went to a Perkins next to the hotel, where I had ham and eggs with hash browns and an enormous raspberry muffin. Margaret ordered from the senior menu, choosing bacon and eggs with pancakes and an immense grapefruit juice. We both had coffee, and with tip the price was around \$20. That’s not cheap, but after London we were used paying more than things were actually worth.

We got more coffee in the Motel 6 office, where we checked out without incident. Margaret made a wrong turn off of Fleur, following me westbound on the beltway when she really wanted to go east. She turned around at the next exit. I made a similar mistake, missing my exit to highway 141 at the northwest corner of Des Moines. You can tell we were both still very tired. It was raining in Des Moines, and that turned to a freezing mist around highway 20. Things were a bit slippery north of there, but I made it home safely.

## General Observations

I thought it might be amusing to haul out the “FAQ” section I used when writing up Spain and Russia two decades ago. We’ll see how well those questions apply to Britain. I may also add a few additional queries as I see fit.

### Did you like London?

Yes, I did—very much. I like almost everywhere I’ve been, and even the places I haven’t been thrilled with, I usually find “interesting”. London was interesting, but it was also fun. I was also pleasantly surprised that, with a few exceptions, the place wasn’t particularly tourist oriented. **[I think that feeling was because we stayed well away from a center and for the most part avoided the big tourist draws.]** London really comes across as a collection of small towns that have grown together, which is precisely what it is. I think it would be a fascinating place to live—though how anyone affords to live there I can only imagine.

### What did you like the most?

Of the attractions we saw, there’s no question but what it’s the Geffrye Museum. It’s one of the most fascinating museums I’ve seen anywhere. I’m surprised the Smithsonian hasn’t created an American equivalent showing the history of domestic life in our country. **[That really would be a good idea.]** The main collection at the Geffrye was interesting and excellently presented, but the Christmas exhibit put it in another league entirely. Best of all, the place was free.

I also very much liked the Britain at War Experience; I’m glad I paid their pricey admission. I liked that it was not so much a museum of war as a celebration of life. They didn’t dwell on fighting World War II; instead they focused on how this proud nation managed to survive under constant attack. While World War certainly affected the home front in America deeply (far deeper than any event since then), there is no comparison in our country’s history for what Britain went through during the Blitz. This wasn’t the best museum I’ve seen anywhere, but it was one of the most moving.

### What did you like the least?

I could certainly mention overpriced attractions like Madame Tussaud’s, tacky neighborhoods like South Wimbledon, or the silly plot of *We Will Rock You*, but there’s nothing we saw or did that I really disliked. So instead I’ll say that what did irritate me on this trip was London’s dreadful lack of directional signage. I would think that a place that can afford to spend millions of dollars on needless security cameras could put up a few signs saying the names of their streets or the addresses of buildings. We lost a lot of time just wandering around because things weren’t properly signed. They manage to put up street signs in old cities like Paris and Madrid; why on earth can’t they do it in London?

### What are the British people like?

That’s a nearly impossible question to answer. First the only Britons I saw were Londoners, and just like all Americans aren’t New Yorkers, certainly not everyone in Britain resembles the residents of the capital. Moreover, it seemed to me that people behaved differently in different settings. On the tube, which is where we did much of our people-watching, people were generally much more quiet than they would be on a transit train in America. If that fit the stereotype of the Brits being cold and reserved, though, the boisterous crowd at the play seemed quite the opposite. Most of the people we saw were helpful and polite, but I heard more cursing in London than I’ve ever heard in public in America. There were a lot of contrasts like that, so it’s really hard to make any blanket statements.

## Are Britons rich or poor?

In terms of raw income, Brits certainly would make more than Americans—or pretty much anyone else on earth for that matter. The cost of living more than makes up for that, though. Britain (or at least its capital) really comes across as a very middle class place. For the most part wealth is not ostentatiously displayed here, although there are certainly many people who live **very** comfortably. (We read about investment brokers who were getting New Year bonuses in excess of a million pounds.) There also doesn't seem to be much horrible poverty. While we did see beggars, they didn't look as desperate as many of their equivalents in most other countries. Britain was, of course, the place that invented the western welfare state, with cradle-to-grave medical care among other benefits. While a lot of that has been eroded in recent years, they still have a far better "safety net" than we do.

## How was your English?

I purposely kept this question that in other travelogues has asked about my skills in Spanish, French, and Russian. The United States and the United Kingdom have been described as "two countries divided by a common language" (George Bernard Shaw), and there is certainly much British English that is different than the language of America. Having studied some linguistics, I knew that much American usage and pronunciation was actually older than that of England, yet in our immigrant nation we have also borrowed far more words from other languages.

Travel books make a lot of the differences, though most of the language found in their dual vocabularies is of little use to the casual tourist. Those that were, I mostly knew ahead of time—things like "lift" for "elevator" or "tube" for "subway". The guidebooks also make a big deal of things like "Cockney rhyming slang". If that exists at all these days, I never heard it—and my bet is that anyone who uses it also understands standard English. **[I think travel books are universally bad sources for language information. In planning my upcoming trip to Iceland, I found several books that implied that knowing how to say the phrase "Do you speak Icelandic" in Icelandic would be useful. I'd think it would be much more useful to know how to say "Do you speak English"—though saying those words in English and waiting for a response would likely bring the needed answer.]**

While vocabulary was no problem, I had quite a challenge training my ear to understand the "received pronunciation" that in British newscasts and recorded announcements. The vowel sounds of "good" English are just plain nasty to my ear, not nearly so pleasant as the "British" speech Hollywood portrays in spy movies. Pretty much no vowel is pronounced the same on both sides of the Atlantic, and there doesn't seem to be a lot of pattern to how the Brits choose to pronounce a vowel in any given word. Combined with the speed that Britons talk (**much** faster than American speech) and the British tendency to drop or slur the later syllables in lengthy words, listening took a lot more effort than it normally does at home.

That said, I never had any problem at all making myself understood. Perhaps that's because as an American I tend to have that cowboy drawl that takes things slower and pronounces every sound in each word. It could also be that the Brits are used to hearing American accents from "the tele" and "the cinema". I avoided a few things I knew might cause confusion (like the American euphemisms for the room where a toilet is found), but I certainly never had any problems communicating.

One final observation on language was how pleasant it was to hear black people in Britain speaking clear, distinct English. I have gotten used to having communications problems in America with black service workers. (Indeed, I often find it easier to communicate with people whose native language is Spanish than with those who speak black English.) In Britain, though, the black people mostly seem to speak the Queen's English. The people who were hard to understand were the East European immigrants, not those from Africa or the Caribbean. **[British blacks are a well-established minority. They have lived in the country for generations, often in settings similar to American housing projects. It is interesting that they don't seem to have developed a unique dialect like the "Ebonics" that seems to be favored by urban African-Americans.]**

## What was it like visiting during the holidays?

I should ask, of course, what it was like to visit at "Festive Season"—we must use the proper politically correct non-religious name for that celebration that comes a week before New Year. It was interesting. I enjoyed seeing the city decorated, though I can't really say any of the decorations were spectacular. **[Of the places I've been at Christmas, Chicago and Montreal have had the nicest decorations.]** It was also fun to see people out doing their shopping at the after-Christmas sales. What's more, I must say it was fun to be in a large city when it was cold out. So often vacations are all about hot weather, and taking a trip in winter was fun.

It intrigued me too that Britain seems to maintain a lot of religious customs at Christmas, even though in terms of church attendance it's the least religious country on earth. Almost all the Christmas cards we saw, for instance, had religious themes, as did many of the decorations. I also got the feeling that people still found it important to attend church on Christmas, even if less than 10% of them are there on any other day of the year.

Even non-Christian immigrants seemed to find Christmas a mostly religious holiday. I was fascinated to see several businesses owned by Middle Eastern or Asian people with very religious Christmas displays in their windows. That may be similar to immigrants in our country who prominently display the flag to avoid being a target for criticism. I still found it interesting, though.

## What's life like in a police state?

I was too polite to actually put that question in when I wrote about Russia. It's kind of scary, though, that it's a question that fits fairly well in modern-day Britain. They don't have officers on every corner (in fact I almost never saw a "bobby" in London), but they sure do have a lot of cameras. You can ignore them, but if you look up in almost any public place, they're there **[at least in commercial and touristy areas]**. I still don't see the need for all that security in a place with far less crime (and especially less violent

crime) than America. They seem to be just an accepted part of life here, though, and I guess they help relieve people's paranoia. Combining all those cameras with the laws that give the police very prying powers, it really does seem as if George Orwell was writing about his own country rather than the Soviet Union.

What's weird is that most people seem to pretty much ignore the cameras. A lot of "anti-social behavior" continues to happen whether a camera is monitoring it or not. The man Margaret saw smoking dope by the Geffrye is just one example of this. So is graffiti that covers lots of those brick walls, all the swearing, and many public displays of affection. (In fact one TV show I saw was made up of footage of people being—shall we say—more than affectionate when they were caught on security cameras.) The people in Britain don't seem to think of the cameras as an intrusion on their freedom, which seems very odd to me. It bothers me to see our government imagining threats everywhere and our country moving more and more toward security being everything. I only hope that, like Britain, we can remain a free country.

### **What will you remember most from the trip?**

On many of my trips, the main memory I've had years later is of just wandering through random neighborhoods. That will definitely be the case in London. Unlike most tourists, I didn't see Buckingham Palace, nor did I go inside most of the "must see" landmarks in Britain's capital. I don't really feel like I missed much, though, because I had a wonderful time exploring all the neighborhood high streets. Southwark, Camden Town, Canary Wharf, Soho, and Greenwich are on the tourist radar, but most of the places I went aren't. I'm probably in a very select group of Americans who can claim to have visited Shoreditch, Shadwell, Marleybone, Rotherhithe, Morden, Silvertown, Tooting, Elephant & Castle, Balham, and Bethnal Green—not to mention Colliers Wood. While I saw a lot of locations of Sainsbury's and Carphone Warehouse, I also saw a lot of Londoners going about their daily life. To me that's always the most fun part of a vacation, and I really had fun seeing all the people here. Someday I'll go back to London (though I'll probably be a "concession" before I save enough money for a repeat trip). I'm sure I'll visit a few more of the famous attractions, and I'll probably make excursions to places like Canterbury and Stonehenge. I'll guarantee you, though, that I'll also have fun exploring even more of this city's fascinating neighborhoods.

