

THE FULL MONTY

BRITAIN 2026



The title of this travelogue comes from a British slang term meaning “a complete set”. It is probably best known from a movie and play about redundant (i.e. laid off) factory workers who take a job as Chippendale-style exotic dancers. In that context it refers to dancing in their birthday suits, displaying everything God gave them. Here the meaning is a bit more tame. It describes a trip that would take me all over Britain. While I’d been to London on an earlier trip, this one would take me all around “the full monty” of all four countries that make up the United Kingdom and even on a brief side trip to Dublin in the Republic of Ireland. It was a trip I was very much looking forward to.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 15

ALGONA, IOWA TO MOLINE, ILLINOIS VIA MAQUOKETA

I left home at 7:15 this morning, having mostly packed my car the previous day. I was pleased that I could move around easily. My knees had been giving me problems for more than a year, which had made it painful to walk and get up from sitting. Yesterday I had my annual “wellness” exam at the clinic, and that resulted in a cortisone shot that made me more comfortable and more flexible. I’ll still try to treat my knees carefully on this trip, but I should be able to get around okay.

I began the trip with the arrow-straight southward on U.S. 169 from Algona to Humboldt. What stood out most on this stretch was how good the crops looked. Farmers have been complaining that we haven’t had enough rain, but everything looked green and healthy—quite a bit better than they have in other recent years.

I stopped for breakfast at Hardees in Humboldt, a frequent tradition for me when I head out of town. I love Hardees’ biscuits, and biscuits in general aren’t something that exists at all in Britain. I was glad to grab a bite when I could.

I continued south to Ft. Dodge doing precisely 60 miles per hour. That’s pretty much the speed I’ve always taken this road at, but thanks to Iowa’s recent law change it’s actually legal to go that fast on two-lane highways now. They’ve also increased the speed limit on 169 inside Ft. Dodge itself, which made it seem like I got through in record time.

I turned east on U.S. 20, which I followed for most of the day. It felt weird to continue east past I-35 instead of heading south toward Des Moines. I’m pretty sure the last time I drove that stretch was on the way to state football last fall. It was actually quite a pretty drive today, with wildflowers all through the ditches and median. Traffic was heavy, but it flowed right along.

There was major construction in Cedar Falls. They are completely rebuilding the eastbound lanes of highway 20, so all traffic is routed to the north side of the road. They also have all the Cedar Falls exits closed completely. I’d originally planned to stop at a Kwik Star in Cedar Falls, but there was no practical way to do that. Instead I continued east and finally stopped at a truck stop at the east edge of Waterloo.

I bought gas at the truck stop, which turned out to be a mistake. The price was \$3.89⁹ for E-15. (They didn’t even have the standard E-10 available.) The next station I saw was \$3.59⁹, and I saw it for as low as \$3.49⁹ further east.

I continued east to Dubuque and followed the relatively new U.S. 52 bypass around the city. I made an awkward left turn to get onto U.S. 61 south and then headed southward to my brother John’s home in Maquoketa. I arrived there around 11:45.

I had a nice visit with John and Janet throughout the afternoon. John grilled chicken thighs, which we had for lunch together with a tabbouleh salad and naan bread with hummus. It really was a delicious lunch. It was also wonderful to see them again and get caught up.

I left Maquoketa around 5:30 and continued south to the Quad Cities. I’d put my hotel into Google Maps, and on this occasion I was glad I did. While the location appeared to be at the interchange of I-74 and John Deere Road, to reach it I actually had to exit a

mile north of there and follow the access road southward. The hotel is also hidden behind a 7-Eleven, so it was a bit of a challenge to find. Eventually I did get to the Spark by Hilton—Moline/Quad Cities, though. Apparently this was once a Comfort Inn, and it appears Spark is a downgrade. It's not a bad hotel, and since I was here on a point redemption at Hilton's minimum rate, I had nothing to complain about.

I decided to have dinner at Steak 'n' Shake. This time Google Maps screwed up the directions. They didn't account for the fact that there's a cement median on John Deere Road. The route they gave only allowed me to access the north side, while Steak 'n' Shake was on the south side. I ended up going around the cloverleaf on I-74 to get to the south side of John Deere Road. I had their five-way chili (spaghetti topped with chili and meat sauce, onions, cheese, and beans. It's not really posh cuisine, but it was tasty.

I drove almost exactly 300 miles today. I've read Europeans commenting on how far Americans drive in a day. While the driving part of the day was a bit dull, to me 300 miles didn't really seem all that long. It's interesting that it's roughly the distance from London to the Scottish border—not a distance most Britons would think of as a day trip. There are many times I've driven double that in a day, though.

Probably the worst feature of this hotel was the TV. It's designed primarily to access streaming and gaming services, but that made it all but impossible to get "normal" television. The remote control didn't even have numbers on it, so to access anything I had to scroll through an endless, slow-moving guide with channels arranged in no particular order. Then if I wanted to switch to something else, I had to access that guide again, and the list went back to the beginning each time. There was nothing I felt I had to watch, so I went to bed fairly early.

THURSDAY, **J**ULY 16

MOLINE, ILLINOIS TO CHICAGO & OAK PARK, ILLINOIS

I slept reasonably well and was up right at 6am. The hotel had a powerful, hot shower, and that did a good job of getting me ready for the day. Breakfast was a less positive experience, leaning very much to the "continental" side of things. The one hot item they had was a pan of rubbery scrambled eggs that looked like they had been reheated for days. I had a small serving of those and also a bagel with raspberry cream cheese. Then I was on my way at 7:00.

I crossed the Rock River to the grounds of the Quad City Airport and soon joined the beltway south of Moline. I had an uneventful drive eastward on I-80, though traffic was heavier than it often is on this stretch. There was a bit of construction along the way, but I still made it to Princeton at 7:55.

I stopped briefly to buy gas at a Casey's in Princeton. While Illinois always has comparatively expensive gas (\$4.04⁹ today), I generally prefer that my tax money go there, where it does things like subsidize the trains I'd be riding today and tomorrow.

While I was buying gas I got a text from Amtrak notifying me that my train this morning would be twenty minutes late. That's not surprising, particularly in very hot weather, and a twenty-minute delay is really nothing at all for Amtrak.

Since I had a bit of time to kill, I had a second breakfast (and a better one) at the Princeton McDonalds. The restaurant had been recently remodeled, and the décor stood out because it featured a map of streets in the western suburbs of Chicago. While Princeton is only about a hundred miles from the city, it's anything but suburban. It's telling that Princeton is the seat of Bureau County (as in the Farm Bureau) and their biggest industry is an ethanol plant. I'm not sure why McDonalds made the choice they did with the decorations.

I got to Princeton station at 8:30, approximately the time the train was originally scheduled to leave. I parked, got out my bags, and joined about two dozen people in the waiting room. About 8:45 the station attendant told us the train would be coming in five minutes, and we all made our way outside.

Boarding took a bit longer than normal, because there was a handicapped person joining the train at Princeton. Most rural stations in America aren't directly accessible, requiring passengers to walk up steps from the platforms to the train cars. When disabled passengers need to board at Princeton, they haul out a special lift that takes the wheelchair up to the level of the train entrance and then place a gap filler so the passengers can negotiate their way aboard. The process takes about five minutes, so it wasn't surprising that we didn't actually leave until 8:58am—27 minutes late.

My ticket today was for a business class seat, though it appears they've reduced the value of such seats. It used to be that business class occupied half the café car and featured enormous reclining seats similar to what you'd see in domestic first class on a plane. Today the seats occupy a full car (which meant there were a lot more empties), but they're much closer together than they used to be. This car was also designed so that almost all the seats faced backwards. I'm sure that's so the train can be quickly turned and leave Chicago with them facing forward, but it is awkward for this trip.

One of the perks of business class is complimentary beverages. That was easy to claim when the seats were right in the café car. Today there was no indication of where the café was, and it turned out I had to walk back three cars to get my free coffee. Mind you, I could probably use the exercise.

While we were stopped in Plano, Illinois, I got a notification that I could check in for my first hotel in Britain. It was too late to cancel it if something went wrong, so I went ahead and went through the formalities on the train. Hopefully that will make things go smoothly when I get there.

There was track work near Plano, and that briefly slowed us down to a crawl. While there is a bit of cushion built into the schedule, we used that up and more. We officially arrived at Chicago Union Station at 11:08, thirty-five minutes behind schedule. Fortunately I was in no great hurry today.

Normally when I come to Chicago by train I make my way three blocks south to the blue line, which is in a subway underneath the Eisenhower Expressway. Today, though, I walked nearly a mile north, eventually making my way to the green line Clinton station. Though further away, this is really a nicer station. Escalators, an elevator, and ramps make it easy to reach the platforms even with luggage.

My knee ached today, which the doctor implied it probably would a couple days after the shot. He also said that after a day or two more it should feel better semi-permanently. I certainly hope that will be the case.

My hobbling drew the attention of several cabbies who wanted to offer me a lift. If I had taken a cab, it would likely have been an expensive journey. On the other hand my \$5 day pass on the 'L' was downright cheap.

I just missed a train when I got to Clinton station, and I had about a ten-minute wait for the next one. It was very smoky out today. Apparently Chicago is downwind from wildfires in Minnesota and Ontario, and the city was definitely getting the effect of that today. I saw many people wearing face masks that reminded me of COVID, and I wouldn't have minded wearing one myself.

I rode to the end of the line at Harlem Avenue in Oak Park and walked a couple blocks north to Lake Street, the main drag in this western suburb. Oak Park is one of the wealthiest areas of Chicagoland, yet its downtown is overrun with beggars. I suppose those who struggle congregate where the money is, and Oak Park definitely has more than its fair share.

I made my way to the Holiday Inn Express—Chicago West/Oak Park. This hotel occupies the upper floors of an art deco building that I think was originally a bank. The bottom floor includes a Barnes & Noble bookstore, a cannabis shop, a yoga studio, and a Nando's restaurant. The latter got me in the mood for my trip. Nando's was originally founded in South Africa, but today it's headquartered in London and is the largest restaurant chain in the United Kingdom. Chicago was their first outpost in the States, though today there are Nando's in several cities around the country.

I had to take an elevator up to the main lobby, and there was a long wait for it. I got upstairs right at noon, which I knew would be too early to check in. I was able to leave my bags, and the clerk told me a room should be ready in an hour or an hour and a half. Both of those would be well before the official check-in time.

After leaving my bags I made my way across Harlem Avenue to the suburb of River Forest. I went into a restaurant called Cava, part of a chain headquartered in the D.C. area. They serve Mediterranean food in a setting similar to Chipotle. You order a bowl or wrap and customize it with a wide range of fillings. I got a Greek salad and a Mexican diet cola. There were no free tables in the restaurant, so I ended up having my lunch in a nearby park. While the table was covered with graffiti detailing the exploits of the area boys, it still made a pleasant place to enjoy my salad.

As I finished my lunch a group of kids who were part of summer day camp came through with their counselors. It stood out that the whole group was black—not something we typically see in the rural Midwest.

I walked about a mile east on Lake Street, past businesses, public buildings, and numerous churches. Most noteworthy among these was Unity Temple, a church designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. I toured that building years ago and even went to a Christmas Eve service there. It's far from my favorite church; indeed I'd say almost any of the other grand old churches in Oak Park look nicer than it.

I had lunch at a place called Courageous Cones. While I have no clue what about them is courageous, they do serve good ice cream. I had blueberry soft serve in a chocolate waffle cone, and it was delicious.



Unity Temple

It was about a quarter to two when I got back to the Holiday Inn Express. A room was now available, and while the check-in process took unusually long, eventually I could make my way inside. While the view is of nothing but a parking ramp, the room is pleasant in most other respects. It's also pleasantly air conditioned and free of the heavy smoke outside.

I spent most of the rest of the afternoon just lounging around at the hotel. With the heavy smoke (honestly the worst pollution I've encountered in decades—and none of it local), it was a chore to do anything outside.

Around five I went out for dinner. I found a place called Tacos El Tío about a block east on Lake Street. While it appeared the employees were mostly “las sobrinas” (nieces, rather than the uncle in the restaurant's name), it was still a pleasant place to eat. Everything was nicely decorated with Mexican paintings and papel picado, and the food was good too. I had a dinner platter with three tacos al pastor, rice, and beans, and I also had a bottle of Mexican apple pop.

I took the green line back downtown, this time getting off at the big Clark & Lake mixmaster. That station is a messy construction site at the moment, because they're in the process of remodeling the Thompson Center in which the station is located. This former government building was renowned for its modern architecture, but it was a nightmare to heat and cool. I can remember going to the food court there once and noticing how ridiculously hot the place was in summer. They're completely rebuilding the exterior with materials that provide more insulation and also reconfiguring the inside for the new tenant, Google. I'll be curious to see it when it's completed, but for now it's an utter mess.

I transferred to the blue line and rode south two stops to Monroe and Dearborn. Just east of there is the building that used to be known as the Schubert Theatre. (It's now named after the Canadian International Bank of Commerce, one of several foreign banks that are big in Chicago.) While it was just fifteen minutes to showtime, there was a huge line out the door for security at the entrance. I didn't get to my seat until about 6:55pm.

I was here to see the show *Suffs*, a historical fiction musical set amid the struggle for women's suffrage. My brother Paul and his wife Vicky saw the show in Des Moines last spring, and it appeared they liked it a lot. I can't say I cared much for *Suffs*, though. It moves rather slowly (though I think that's intentional, to convey the pace of progress in the movement), and I just didn't care for the music.

The show is unique in having an all female cast, with women consciously playing male roles like President Woodrow Wilson. It used an almost constantly changing, very elaborate set and quite elegant period costumes. Almost all of the lighting was done with spotlights, which made things seem dim overall. Finally they'd chosen to accompany the show with recorded music rather than a live orchestra. Overall the show was unique, but far from my favorite.

I got a text during the show, which I checked at intermission. It was a message from United Airlines informing me that they'd changed the type of aircraft for my flight to London. Because of that my seat assignment had changed. Fortunately the change wasn't anything major. I had been in 42-F, the aisle seat on the right side of the center section of a 3—3—3 configuration, and I'd been moved to 42-D, which was the aisle seat on the left side of the center. The configuration was now 2—3—2, though, so it would have been much more of a change for people in the side sections.

I had an uneventful ride back to Oak Park on an almost empty green line train. Then I settled into bed and had a pretty decent night's sleep.

FRIDAY, **J**ULY 17 **OAK PARK & CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**

There was no real rush this morning. I'd set the alarm on my phone for 7:30, but I was up well before then. The shower at the Holiday Inn Express was warm and powerful, though there appeared to be no way to stop it from leaking onto the bathroom floor.

Holiday Inn Express always has a pretty decent breakfast. My only complaint today would be that they had two types of sausage, but no bacon at all. Their nice cinnamon rolls definitely made up for any flaws, though.

I left the hotel right at nine. There was no hurry to leave, but there was also no reason to sit around the room all day. When I went outside it seemed slightly less smoky than yesterday. It still looked like there was a thick fog everywhere, though.

I made my way to a bus stop just around the corner from the hotel. Before long I caught bus 90, which runs along Harlem Avenue, connecting the green line station at the south and the blue line station at the north. I'd taken parts of this route before, though never as far south as in Oak Park. The bus runs quite slowly. It stops every couple of blocks, with most of the passengers going about a mile or so.

I rode nearly the length of the route. While I got on one stop north of the green line, I rode clear to the north end of the line. By the time I neared the blue line station my fellow passengers included a couple of flight attendants who would be making the same transfer I was.

The bus let out right at the entrance of Harlem & Higgins station. I made my way through the turnstile (with the same day pass I had from yesterday) and soon caught an outbound blue line train. It was about 10:10am when we made it to O'Hare.

I thought of my mother as I made my way through the basement tunnels between the terminals. Like hers did through pretty much my whole childhood, my knees were aching, and my progress was slow. Eventually I did make my way to terminal 1 and went up the escalators to the United check-in area.

I checked my larger bag (the one I bought in Japan last summer) with no problem. I wanted to get a printed boarding pass, though, and that took a bit more effort. Eventually I did secure one. I'm glad of that, since United's app (which they want you to use for your boarding pass) repeatedly crashes on both my main and travel phones.

There was practically nobody at security, but it still took nearly ten minutes to make my way through an enormous, empty tape maze. When I reached the front it was not really surprising that the sleeves on my knees created an anomaly for the body scanner. I probably should have worn shorts so the agents could clearly see what they were. With long pants on, though, I got taken aside for a private screening. I had to lower my pants. They first went over the sleeves with a wand and then felt them manually. Finally they did an explosives test on them. Everything came back negative, of course, but it took another ten minutes before I was free to go. All that time my belongings were sitting at the end of the screening belt. I'd heard horror stories of people who had their belongings stolen at airport security. Fortunately, all of my stuff was still there when the agents were done with me.

My route on the secure side of the airport was familiar, as it was almost the same as what I'd done a year ago when I flew to Japan. The terminal 1 security lets out right by the escalators that lead to the tunnel going to the C-gates. I made my way past the enormous light sculpture in that tunnel and came out right by the Polaris lounge I was in last year. Unfortunately the economy ticket I had this time wouldn't let me in there, so instead I found Gate C-15, from which my flight was scheduled to leave.

I had bought a pass for the less prestigious United Club lounge. (You may recall I got a similar pass when I flew to Charlotte a couple years ago.) Unfortunately they restrict access to that lounge to no more than three hours before a flight, and that meant I had about two hours to kill on the concourse. I alternated between people watching, doing a bit of travel research, and reading in the Kindle app on my phone. The book I had on Kindle this time was *A Different Kind of Power*, the autobiography of former New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern. The prime minister, who most experts still say coordinated the world's best response to the COVID pandemic, goes through her background and also contrasts herself with other world leaders such as the American President whose COVID response was nowhere near so effective. It's a fascinating book, and it also helped me relive the trip I made to New Zealand a few years back.

Looking at all the people passing along the concourse, one thing that stood out was just how many people are employed at a major airport. Of course there's all the gate agents, flight crew, TSA officers, and tarmac workers. What I hadn't really thought of before, though, was all the other people who work at a place like O'Hare. I must have seen three dozen wheelchair pushers, for instance, and I couldn't begin to count all the guys who pushed carts around as they delivered goods to all the shops and restaurants along the concourse. I also saw multiple people whose entire job was delivering lavatory supplies to the airplanes parked at the gates.

While this concourse is entirely sealed, there are still a couple of birds flying around. I don't know if there's a hole in the ceiling somewhere or if they happened to get in through one of the jetways. It's amusing to see, whatever the reason.

Also strange to see are all the people who appear to be walking around while talking to themselves. They're actually taking phone calls over head phones, but it looks like they're just mumbling as they walk.

About 1:30 I decided to make good on the lounge pass I had bought. At precisely the time I decided to go in, the United Club at gate C-15 suddenly put a sign out saying they were unable to accept one-day passes, presumably because they were full. I went into the United app on my phone and found the status of all the different United clubs at O'Hare. There was one by gate B-18 that the app said was "not busy", so I made the long hike over there. When I got there they too had a sign that said they were unable to accept one-day passes. I checked the app again. It said they were still empty, but they were indeed refusing to accept passes. In fact the one (of six) lounges that it said was accepting passes was a lounge by gate B-6 that the app actually said was "very busy".

I made my way over to B-6 (which was conveniently right by the tunnel to the C-gates), and indeed they didn't have a sign up refusing passes. There was, however, a slow-moving line out the door. Holding up that line were people who wanted to get special treatment from the lounge bouncer. One was flying on a different airline than United, and that doesn't provide access. The other had already used a day pass earlier in the day, but then his flight was delayed and he wanted to use the same pass again. The bouncer actually bought his sob story and let him in. When I got to the front of the line I got in easily. The place was indeed quite busy, but there were still a few places to sit.

Mostly I just ate in the lounge. I'd purposely skipped lunch, and I knew it would be quite a while until they served anything on the plane. I took a small portion of pretty much everything they had (salad, two kinds of soup, miniature paninis and wraps, Mexican food, fruit, and cheese. I did skip the alcoholic drinks (which for many people is the whole point of the lounge), and I also held back on desserts. I did enjoy a lot of food, though, and I think I got my money's worth.

We were supposed to board at 3:45, but in fact they didn't begin until about 4:10pm. I'd love to know how United determines their boarding groups, because there seemed to be more people in groups 1 and 2 than in all the others. Since I was part of group 5, that meant I didn't board until almost our scheduled 4:30 departure time.

This flight was weird because none of the window shades were up when we boarded, and none of the people in the window seats put them up. In fact, I went through the entire flight without seeing a single thing outside. Of course being in the center section, I really didn't have an option to choose otherwise, but it's weird that the people on the sides didn't want to see anything.

We left the gate at 4:45 (fifteen minutes late, but then there was a long wait before we were allowed to taxi. Once we got clearance, we basically just took right off. We were in the air at 5:10pm.

We took off to the north, flew up to Milwaukee, and then out over Lake Michigan. As we were nearing the Mackinac Strait they did a drink service accompanied by a weird snack that consisted of five miniature bead sticks and a small hunk of flavorless white cheese all laminated together.

They served dinner as we crossed northern Ontario. I had pot roast over mashed potatoes, with green beans, a tossed salad, a dinner roll, and what they called a "cheesecake brownie". Everything was good, but the portions were almost comically small. I had exactly five green beans, and there were three tiny chunks of beef hidden in the gravy.

Since I was just three rows from the back of the plane, the toilets were convenient to me. It surprised me that this plane had a handicapped toilet, one that was more than twice as big as what I'd typically seen on planes. The other side had two standard bathrooms and some storage space in the same area the disabled one took.

I noticed that six seats across the aisle from me were empty during this flight. I'd checked the seat map earlier today, and it showed they were occupied (and that it was a sold-out flight), so I assumed a group must have missed their flight. It turned out that those seats were actually used for crew rest, though. They ran a big curtain across all three pairs of seats. Three crew members sat behind those curtains in the middle part of the flight, and three others were there at the end. It is interesting that they got two seats each, a big enough area that they can sort of cocoon and take a power nap.

They dimmed the lights near the border of Quebec and Labrador. I don't think it was actually night out, but that as any to declare one day over and another one begun.

SATURDAY, **J**ULY 18 LONDON TO DONCASTER & SHEFFIELD, ENGLAND

I never really slept, but I did rest my eyes quite a bit. As I always do, I had the map on my TV. It intrigued me that after leaving Labrador, almost the whole remainder of the trip was over water. I'm pretty certain there was more time over water than I'd had on the way to Japan. We flew south of the tip of Greenland and then well south of Iceland. We then cut above the salt water passage that separates Northern Ireland and Scotland and finally over the Irish Sea. We were briefly over land as we passed the Isle of Man, but we didn't get it permanently until they announced our descent as we cut in from the coast between Liverpool and Manchester.

There was a small snack service before landing, though what meal, which I suppose would best be called "brunch". We had a choice of a scone (in the American usage of that term) or a tiny panini. I had the scone, though it looked like the little sandwich would have been slightly more filling.

We landed at 6:33am, basically on time. I turned on the new SIM card I'd gotten for my travel phone, and I was pleased to find that—unlike in Japan—it worked precisely as it should.

Customs and immigration were rather a joke. Except for people coming from third world countries, the arrival process is entirely automated in Britain these days. Passengers scan their passports at a gate, and after just a second or two the gate opens. In order to visit at all, you have to go online to fill out an "electronic travel authority". The questions for that were pretty generic, too, though. A single woman was watching at least a dozen lanes, and all she really did was deal with mechanical issues rather than asking immigration questions. Once I passed immigration, I claimed my checked bag (which arrived on the carousel just as I got there) and made my way to the "nothing to declare" lane. So did everyone else on the plane. A very bored looking man sat by the exit, but he didn't stop a soul from proceeding. I was officially a free man in London by 7:10am.

Before this trip I'd bought a BritRail pass, a similar product to what I used to ride trains in Japan a year ago. The British pass was cheaper, though (particularly since I qualified as a senior), and it provided a huge savings over the normally very expensive fares on British trains. The pass was in the form of a QR code on my phone. In major stations I scanned the code to enter and exit, and train guards (i.e., conductors) could scan it to show my fare was paid.

The pass works on all intercity passenger trains in Great Britain, and it also works on some (but not nearly all) local trains. It doesn't work on the London tube, for instance. They make a point of telling passholders that there is a free way to cross the city and transfer from Heathrow to what they call "national rail" stations in central London. This involves a new line called the Elizabeth line, which

the queen opened shortly before she died. This basically functions as an express subway, going much faster than the parallel Picadilly line. It shows in purple on the tube map, but because it got lots of funding from the national government, Elizabeth line fares have to be integrated with everything else national rail does, including the BritRail pass.

There are three transit options to get from Heathrow into the city. The Picadilly line is very slow (over an hour to downtown), and it's relatively cheap (about five pounds). The Heathrow Express is much faster (15 minutes), but it costs five times as much and only goes to a single station, Paddington. The Elizabeth line costs the same as the Picadilly line, but it's more than twice as fast. It also goes clear across the city, stopping pretty much everywhere locals want to go. Because of this the Elizabeth line is very popular. It was standing room only when we left Heathrow, and more and more people crammed on as we made our way across London's western suburbs. By the time we got to Paddington it was as packed as any of the trains I'd been on in Tokyo. People gradually started getting off, and by the time we got to my stop (Farringdon), it was easy for me to get off.

Because it's brand new, the central part of the Elizabeth line is in a tunnel bored deep underground. To get from there to the main north—south train (called Thameslink) I had to go up a massive escalator.

I transferred to a Thameslink and rode one stop north to the St. Pancras—Kings Cross complex. More than half of the trains that serve London go through here, including most trains to Scotland and the international trains that go through the channel tunnel. The train I'd be taking today also left from Kings Cross, though because everything had gone smoothly so far in London, I had more than an hour to kill at the station first.

I filled a bit of that by running a couple of errands at the station. I found an ATM (invariably called a cash machine in Britain) and withdrew 200 pounds from my bank account. Today a pound is worth around \$1.35, so my total was closer to \$300 than \$200. That's still a better deal than it was just a few years back. Brexit tanked the British pound. This is still not a cheap country, but it's a lot more affordable for a visitor than it used to be.

I made a brief stop at a Waitrose store (the U.K.'s most expensive grocery chain), where all I bought was a bottle of Oasis fruit drink. I attempted to pay with a credit card, but it was rejected for not having the PIN technology they use in Europe. I'd read that card is for British transactions, but I'd find today that it's way easier to spend cash if you're an American.



**The queue to get pictures at Platform 9¾
Kings Cross Station – London**

table, and there was luggage blocking the pathways. Besides the seating there were two electronic coffee machines (one of which was broken), an electric kettle to get hot water for making tea, a couple of pitchers filled with juice, and some bottled water and beer in a refrigerator. They also had shortbread "biscuits" (i.e.: cookies), various bags of "crisps" (i.e., potato chips), and some breath mints. An east European woman with bleached blonde hair bussed the tables and occasionally announced platform numbers in a thick "Natasha" accent straight out of *Rocky and Bullwinkle*.

One of the announcements that was made said that my train (the 9:40 LNER service to Bradford Forster Square) would be leaving from platform 3-b. I made my way down there and discovered that two different trains were leaving at roughly the same time from essentially the same platform. Mine (which was just five cars long, since it was headed to the lesser-used station in a nondescript town by way of several other second-rate places) left from the extreme front of the platform. I had to walk past ten cars from a train that would be leaving for Edinburgh seven minute later before I could get to the train I needed. Fortunately the first-class car was the first one I came to on the second train. It turns out first class is always at the London end of the train.

The U.K. is currently in the process of re-nationalizing passenger rail. British Rail (from which the BritRail pass gets its name) was a government-run company until the 1970s. Margaret Thatcher's government sold things off to a nationwide infrastructure company (Network Rail) that maintains the tracks and numerous private operating companies (like LNER) that have monopolies on trains in different regions. Many of the train operating companies are actually subsidiaries of the national railroads in other countries like Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands. The British government gives them subsidies to provide a given level of service. Particularly since Brexit, people have wondered just how wise it is to pay out subsidies to foreign companies. So the current plan is to re-combine everything into branches

My BritRail pass is for first class. Among other perks that gives me access to first class lounges at many stations. Kings Cross has the flagship lounge for the London North Eastern Railway, and I figured I'd check the place out. That was easier said than done. To reach the lounge guests normally go up an elevator next to Waitrose. There were signs saying that elevator was broken and that access was instead by an elevator on the opposite side of the concourse. It turned out the second elevator was also down. I did manage to find an escalator, but then I still had to drag my bags up a few steps right at the entrance to the lounge.

Once I got there, the LNER lounge was most decidedly not worth it. There were about two dozen marble-topped tables in a room about the size of my classroom. Guests were crammed in, mostly one per

of a government-owned company called Great British Railways. As each of the private contracts expires over the next few years, the different companies will be re-nationalized. (LNER was one of the first to become what they call a crown company.) Private companies will still have the option to operate, but only if they can compete without a subsidy.

I have no idea how this might change things long term. At least for now, and as a passenger riding in first class, my experience on LNER was way better than what I've encountered on Amtrak or VIA Rail Canada or even on the trains I rode in Japan. My train was fast and efficient, and it also seemed luxurious. That said, it also seemed more than a bit overstuffed.

One of the employees was a middle-aged man who had the title of train manager. He made the initial announcements as we left London, but otherwise the first-class passengers never heard from him again. He apparently did serve as the conductor in the standard class cars. In first class we were served by three different women—all of them with fake blonde hair. The most important was a middle-aged British woman who had the title “guard”. She scanned first class tickets, and as far as I could figure out that was all she did. The other two were east European girls of college age. They prepared and served hot meals in first class, and they also pushed a “trolley” (like a stewardess cart) through the coach cars selling drinks and snacks.

LNER serves different menus on its different trains. On this obscure train to Bradford they served the “dine” menu. At breakfast that meant a choice of light, but freshly prepared foods like a bacon roll (kind of like a fancy Egg McMuffin), hot porridge, avocado toast, or (my choice) crumpets with butter and fresh jam. On other trains they will serve the traditional “full English breakfast” (which pairs underdone eggs and meat with a very specific combination of strange ingredients like tomato, baked beans, and a blood sausage called “black pudding”). I've had a full English, and I just didn't care for it much at all. To my mind the crumpets were actually a better choice.

Trains in Britain are frequent, and while locals like to complain about them, compared to North American standards they're fast and on-time. The East Coast Main Line on which LNER runs is a four-track electrified line that almost exclusively serves passenger trains. Freight trains can use the line, but they generally go at night, and passenger trains always have priority—the exact opposite of how things work in the States. LNER's Azuma trains, which look like miniature versions of Japan's Shinkansen trains typically run at 125mph, and on some sections they'll do 150. That's slightly slower than what other European railways manage. The trains will still get you pretty much anywhere in the U.K. in just a few hours, though.

My train today first made a pick-up stop on the outskirts of London in the rather grim-looking town of Stevenage, North of there we mostly went through farm land (hay and rapeseed/canola seemed to be the biggest crops). We also passed countless little towns that were a weird combination of old and new. Almost all of them have a mix of old, stately cottages and “council estates” (old public housing rowhouses, most of which was sold to the occupants in the late 1900s). What really stood out, though, was that a third to half of the homes—old or new—had solar panels on their roofs.

North of Stevenage we went more than an hour without stopping before we got to Newark-Upon-Trent (from which cities in New Jersey and Delaware get their name). The third stop was my destination, and we made it to Doncaster a little more than an hour and a half after leaving London.

I made my way out of Doncaster station. A major highway separates the station from the main part of downtown, and much of it runs in a sort of tunnel with a shopping mall (the Frenchgate Centre) built atop it. I followed a bike path and ended up at the north end of the tunnel by the historic Doncaster Minster church. Right across the street from there was my destination, the brightly colored modern building that housed the Premier Inn—Doncaster Central/High Fishergate.

The majority of my stays on this trip would be at different locations of the Premier Inn chain. The chain (the first word of which is pronounced PREMM-ur) has grown from nothing a couple decades ago into the largest lodging chain in Britain. The company that owns it, Whibred, as founded as a brewery and expanded first into restaurants and then into hotels. They're a type of hotel that doesn't really exist in America these days—very cheap, but clean and respectable. They're also well located, right by all the major train stations and tourist attractions. I was paying right at 55 pounds a night (less than \$75) for the Premier Inn in Doncaster. In America there are utter dives that go for more than that, but in Britain that provided me a perfectly pleasant place to stay.



I'd paid a small extra fee that allowed me to check in early—not just leave my bags, but actually get settled in my room any time after 11am. The check-in process was a bit more complicated than it needed to be, but before too long I went up to Room 219, which had a nice view of the old church across the highway.

I spent about an hour resting up and getting settled. Then shortly before 1pm I headed back to the station to go out exploring for the afternoon. I caught a train that was jam-packed, mostly with high school and college age

Premier Inn Doncaster Central/High Fishergate and the view from Room 219

kids, most of whom were wearing what I'm sure they felt were their best clothes (though that often meant tight-fitting T-shirts for the guys

and overly short sundresses for the girls). They were headed out to spend Saturday at the clubs, and it was clear a lot of them had been “pre-gaming” before they got on the train.

I could tell the Celtic origins of northern England from the kids on the train. I don’t know when I’ve seen so many redheads in one place at the same time, and those who weren’t “gingers” were blond. London was a very multicultural place, and if anything the white people there looked like they were from southern Europe. Yorkshire, on the other hand, was as white as can be.

The train I was on this time was operated by Northern Trains, whose name tells you the region it serves. Northern mostly runs commuter services, and they don’t have first class at all on their trains. I was only riding for less than half an hour, though, so it really didn’t matter.

My destination was Sheffield, which serves as the capital of South Yorkshire and was once the industrial powerhouse of the British north. It was basically the Pittsburgh of Europe. The movie *The Full Monty* begins with clips from a promotional film businesses made about 1950s Sheffield and then switches to the bleak reality when the economy crashed in the ‘70s. The devastation and poverty were also shown in the video for the sad ‘80s song “Life in a Northern Town”.

Like Pittsburgh, Sheffield has reinvented itself for the post-industrial age. The city I saw was much improved from what they showed in *The Full Monty*. Today Sheffield’s biggest industry is education (primarily several major universities), and they’re also big in healthcare and tech-oriented businesses. It was clear that there were still far too many abandoned buildings, though, and the people were far from the richest.



South Yorkshire Supertram (in pride month livery) and typical graffiti in Sheffield

Some of them have been repurposed as trendy apartments and bars (likely where some of the kids on the trains were clubbing), while others have been torn down and replaced with modern condos. The biggest building serves as a museum of industry, and it was a fascinating place to visit.

Sheffield was one of the big centers of the Industrial Revolution. The process of making stainless steel was discovered in Sheffield, and steel was the backbone of the city for most of the 19th and 20th Centuries. Coal from across northern England fed into factories where steam engines processed raw iron into finished products. Not only did they make raw steel in Sheffield; they also manufactured pretty much everything that contains steel—cutlery (for which the city is most famous), weapons, cars, hand tools, garden tools, piping and duct work, and just about anything else you could imagine. The museum showed the processes used to make everything and then displayed the many finished products from the city’s industrial legacy.



Steel crucible and penny farthing bicycle – Kelham Island Museum



When the crash came, Sheffield’s economy dropped faster than just about anywhere else. Pretty much every factory closed all at once during the Thatcher years, and at one point 60% of the adults in South Yorkshire were unemployed. Most had very limited skills outside their factory jobs, which is a large part of the reason the problems lasted for decades.

I thoroughly enjoyed the Kelham Island Museum. It might have also been fascinating to visit a living history village from the industrial revolution era, but for some odd reason they’re closed on weekends.

I made my way to a different tram stop, one that was much closer to the museum. From there I rode to the University of Sheffield. It’s the same combination of old and new academic buildings and cheap student housing you’d find in any college town. A large part of

Sheffield's enrollment is international students, many of whom transferred from American institutions after recent political changes in the States.

My ultimate destination in the university area was the site of a billboard. Ever since COVID, I've regularly followed a British YouTuber named Jack Massey Welsh. His content has changed a lot over the years. Before I watched him he produced gaming videos, though in recent years it's morphed into mostly geography content. Back in 2020 he was part of a contest sponsored by a much larger YouTuber (Mr. Beast) in which he ultimately won \$100,000. The goal of that contest was to generate subscribers or a YouTube channel called "Don't Subscribe" that had no content. One of the things Welsh did was to rent billboards advertising the content, and one of those was on a side street near the university. Today that same billboard shows an ad for Aldi. While it's certainly not a real tourist attraction, it was still fun to see.

I should have taken the tram back downtown. Instead I followed Google Maps' suggestion and walked to my next destination. It turned out to be a long and extremely hilly walk, and it definitely challenged my knees more than I wanted. After about forty-five minutes I made it to the Sheffield Peace Garden. While it was built as a memorial, it's used like any other city park, and it was bustling on Saturday afternoon.

While I was downtown I also saw the Sheffield City Hall (a badly maintained Victorian building that has a surprising amount of graffiti on it), the cathedral (also in bad shape, but without the graffiti), and what they call Castle Square (a pedestrianized shopping area that seems to be constantly shrouded in tobacco smoke—as far as I can tell there's no castle anywhere nearby).

I had dinner today at a Wendy's, which I think makes Britain the sixth country where I've visited that chain. My credit card was again declined by their kiosk, but I was able to pay at the counter. Prices were steep (£7.50 or \$10 for chili and a frosty), and the chili was seasoned with the Indian spices that are popular in Britain rather than the Tex-Mex spices we use in the States.

I caught a tram out to Meadowhall Interchange, which is a combination tram and train station out in the suburbs about halfway to Doncaster. It's named after the Meadowhall complex, a major shopping mall and entertainment facility that looks sort of like the Mall of America for northern England. A kid on the tram had come all the way from Manchester to check out Meadowhall.

I caught a train back to Doncaster. This one was operated by Trans-Pennine Express, and it would rank right in the middle of the different trains I took today. Interestingly, my pass wasn't scanned either going to Sheffield or coming back. That stood out, because there were repeated announcements warning that there was a £100 for riding without a ticket. If they're smart, I'd bet locals keep an anytime ticket (as opposed to one for a specific train) and have it on hand just in case someone is checking for fares.

I took a slightly different route back to the hotel, this time following the mostly pedestrianized "high street" through the city centre. I stopped at Poundland, which is Britain's answer to Dollar Tree. Not everything is a pound at Poundland, but I managed to get seven items for £7. Perhaps most amusing were packs of "Penguins", which are cheap chocolate-covered candies designed for kids. They are basically Britain's answer to Laffy Taffy, since each individual wrapper has a stupid joke on it. For instance, "How do penguins make pancakes? – with their flippers".

I spent much of the evening writing on this, though I also watched a bit of TV. There are dozens of channels, but not much interested me on any of them—just like at home.

SUNDAY, JULY 19 **DONCASTER & YORK, ENGLAND**

I slept very well last night. Premier Inn is supposedly known for their high-quality beds, and this one was indeed comfortable. While there was not a great rush to get up, I set my alarm for 6:30—mostly so I could get caught up on this travelogue. I didn't actually head over to the station until shortly after 9am.

The board showed several trains that were running late this morning. I'd read that this often happens on Sunday, because that's the primary time they do track work in Britain. One was half an hour late, and there were announcements for "delay repay", a program that lets passengers get their fares refunded if a train is more than fifteen minutes behind schedule. Imagine if Amtrak did something like that; they'd immediately go bankrupt.

My train this morning was technically two minutes late, and the staff apologized repeatedly about that delay. The train originated in Doncaster, and apparently it had been slow coming from the storage depot. They noted that "we have a ten-minute sit at York, so we should be on time north of there." They were actually about ten minutes late getting to York, so they couldn't have made up the time they wanted.

York is only twenty minutes north of Doncaster by train. (Google maps shows it as an hour by car via the A1M motorway.) They announced that they wouldn't be serving in first class until after York, so I didn't get any food on the train this morning. This was yet

another time they didn't scan my pass. I have no idea how the cost of the BritRail passes are allocated to different train operators, but there's now three that presumably lost money by not scanning mine.



York city walls

choice, that would be the most extensive thing I'd eat today.

While toward the center of the city of York, the railway station is in a relatively modern area outside the historic walls. It's about a twenty-minute walk to get from the station to the interesting part of York. My knees were aching again pretty badly, but I trudged on. Eventually the scenery shifted from steel and concrete to stone and brick, and I knew I'd made it downtown.

Since I hadn't had breakfast, I stopped at the historic York location of Costa Coffee (the first word is pronounced CAH-stuh), a global chain that used to be owned by the same company that owns Premier Inn but was recently sold to Coca-Cola. I got a breakfast toastie (a grilled sandwich with cheese, bacon, sausage, and—oddly—catsup) and an Americano (watered-down espresso that mimics the coffee served in America). Though not really by my

From Costa the neighborhood got more and more historic and more and more touristy. Of all the places I've been, York is most like New Orleans. The central area is full of historic buildings in various states of repair, most of which are occupied by restaurants, bars, and gift shops. Both the streets and sidewalks are paved unevenly, and people seem to walk around in slow motion. Once I learned to treat it like New Orleans, York was perfectly fine. The throngs of tourists do get in the way, though.

My ultimate destination was York Minster, the second most important cathedral of the Church of England (after Canterbury) and one of the most famous churches in the world. I had decided to go to their eleven o'clock service this morning, so I made my way into the enormous house of worship. I'm sure at Christmas they cram 1,500 or so into York Minster, and of course they've also had crowds like that when the royal family and other dignitaries have worshipped there. On a random summer Sunday there were closer to 300 in the congregation. Most of them appeared to be actual members of this parish (the majority elderly), but there were probably 50 or so other tourists. There were also seven different members of the clergy officiating and a visiting choir from Edinburgh. There were also a couple dozen tourists who came and left during the service. One of them made a bit of a scene because she was annoyed that photography wasn't allowed while people were worshipping.

I've been going to Episcopal services since the Congregational church closed a year ago, and of course this service followed the same order from the *Book of Common Prayer*. I was thankful that unlike the church in Algona they had a bulletin that gave the full text of all the specific prayers they were using today, so I didn't have to keep flipping to different pages to follow along. It was a very "high church" service, which made perfect sense given the setting. That said, the sermon was very chatty and casual. Almost all of the music was unfamiliar (the exception being "The Church's One Foundation"), but the hymns were stately and appropriate. They have a spectacular organ that made the hymns truly rise to heaven.

One thing that stood out was the offering. The rows of chairs were far enough apart that in most cases the ushers could take the plates directly to each person individually, and of course I got the feeling they were checking how much everyone contributed. There was no old lady where two copper coins was everything she had. Ten-pound notes appeared to be the most common, and there were also a lot of twenties. Banks have completely eliminated checks in Britain, but the ushers also carried around QR codes that people could scan to contribute through their phones.

Communion was served at both the front and middle of the sanctuary. The flow was kind of awkward, mostly because the layout of the building doesn't lend itself to people returning from their seat after taking the elements.

All in all, it was a nice service in a truly beautiful setting. Something that surprised me in a Gothic cathedral was how bright the interior was. I've visited other cathedrals that looked dim and dingy, but York Minster was light and airy. Part of that is that the stone is a light color, but it also helps that there's almost more window than stone. It's amazing that builders from the 1300s were able to incorporate so many windows into the building and still give it the strength to survive for centuries.



Central York – looking towards York Minster

The service got out shortly after noon, and I spent the next half hour or so walking around central York. The buildings are a lesson in architecture. The oldest go back to the Norman conquest in the 11th Century, and there's lots of half-timbered Tudor buildings

and elegant Georgian brickwork. It's weird to see 500-year-old buildings that were built as houses and now are home to businesses like Poundland, Five Guys burgers, or Santander (a Spanish-owned bank that's everywhere in Britain).

The oldest whole neighborhood of York is called the Shambles, which in the 1400s housed the city's butcher shops. Today it's a pedestrianized tourist market. You can buy £20 coffee mugs and £50 art prints. I got a postcard with the exact same design as one of the art prints for just 85 pence (\$1.15).

I made my way back to York Minster, where I joined the queue of people who had pre-booked tickets to get in when their door opened to the public for self-guided tours. I spent about an hour wandering through the place, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. York Minster is built on the site of the original Roman settlement of York. There is evidence of Christian worship here as early as the year 170 A.D., and Constantine the Great was proclaimed emperor on the site that is now York Minster while he was visiting the city in 306 A.D.

The first building of St. Peter's Church in York (still the official name of York Minster) went up in 627 A.D. The word "minster" is related to the word "mission"; the church was established as a mission to convert the savage people of "Britannia Inferior". They also ministered to the Vikings who raided York in 866. (The name York derives from the Norse name for the place, Jorvik.) Among the most interesting artifacts in their treasury is a horn that was presented to the Bishop by the Vikings.



Typical windows at York Minster

Construction began on the current cathedral in the year 1080, and the final completion was in 1472. It's a cruciform cathedral, with the altar right at the center of the cross. The main sanctuary extends the longest direction from the altar, and there are smaller chapels and a vestry on the other three sides. While the main Sunday service is always in the big sanctuary, daily services and weekend evening prayer are held in the side chapels.

York Minster was of course founded as a Catholic church. It became Anglican when Henry VIII seized all Catholic property in England. Today they are proud to be one of the more liberal local parishes in the Church of England. Henry and his fifth wife Catherine Howard both worshipped at York Minster. So has almost every monarch since. King Charles most recently worshipped at York Minster in 2022, when he also unveiled a statue of his mother, Queen Elizabeth.

While the current furnishings of the cathedral date to the late 20th Century, they have many older artifacts on display. Two that stood out were a baptismal font from the 13th Century and the old Archbishop's chair (the "cathedra" from which the term "cathedral" comes) from the 17th Century.



Grave on the floor of York Minster

Literally hundreds of people are buried under the floors and in the walls at York Minster. The most famous is St. William of York, a Bishop who was poisoned while saying mass in the original York Minster building. Markers denote many less famous people. There's also a mass grave of World War I veterans from Yorkshire, and there's hundreds of local people from all stations of life who for one reason or another have spent eternity at the cathedral. Some of them died as early as the 8th Century, while others died as recently as 2017. The majority were from the Victorian era, and flowery language extols the wonderful generosity for which they are all remembered.

After seeing the cathedral in more depth than I had this morning, I made my way out to their courtyard. A very talented musician was playing Abba songs on a piano there. While I listened to him, I bought an ice cream cone from a vendor. She made a point of telling me that the strawberry I chose was "the best in Yorkshire, love—made from real local berries". The previous customers bought coffee ice cream, and she didn't make any similar comment to them. It does appear, by the way, that absolutely everybody is addressed as "love" or "dear" around here, with no real affection meant by the terms.

I had another long walk in the afternoon. This time I was headed to the British National Railway Museum. On a map it appears that this is right next to York station, and the grounds are indeed adjacent. It appears that they're building a new museum right by the station, but for now the actual entrance is the better part of a mile away. All along the long path they have signs counting down how many more meters it is to the entrance. They start at 950 meters, and even when it got down to 230 meters, it still seemed a long way away. I'd bought a timed admission for 2:30pm, but it

was all I could do to get there by 2:45.

The railway museum is in York because it was Yorkshire where the world's first railroad was built. Even today York is the main dividing point between north and south for trips across Britain; that's why the train was supposed to have the "10-minute sit" there this morning.



**Old steam engine
National Railway Museum – York**

coin I'd thought was a "nickel" (a tiny octagonal silver-colored coin about the size of a U.S. dime) was in fact a 20p coin. The 5p coin is actually slightly larger, and it's round rather than octagonal. It doesn't help that Britain (much like the U.S.) primarily uses English words for the value of their coins. Instead of saying the number "20" like most countries would, it says "twenty pence" in tiny etched letters.

Both 20p and 5p coins are actually pretty rare. In a single day I've collected a pocketful of one-pound and two-pound coins (both bimetallic like the equivalent Canadian "toonies" or the two-euro coin, but smaller than either of those. I've also gotten a ton of 10p coins (which look like a Canadian quarter) and quite a few 50p coins (about the same size as 20p, but with seven sides instead of round). I've gotten maybe one 1p coin (a small copper coin) and no 2p coins (also copper, but the size of a nickel) at all. Since all U.K. prices include tax, you don't have awkward amounts that require odd change.

Since I detoured to talk about money, I'll also mention the banknotes. British bills are made of plastic, just like Canadian and New Zealand money. The five-pound notes are blue, "tenners" are orange, and twenties are purple. British money has a portrait on both sides of the bill. On most of my money a very young Queen Elizabeth is on the front (though I did get a single £20 note with King Charles on it), and other famous Britons are on the reverse. Winston Churchill is on the five, Jane Austen is on the ten, and artist J.M.W. Turner is on the twenty. There's theoretically also a £50 note (red, with Alan Turing on it), but I haven't seen one. The ATM gave me tens and twenties, and I prefer it that way.

Getting back to the day—the railway museum was interesting, but it didn't take as long to see as I thought it might. I decided to change my return to Doncaster to an earlier train. I slowly made my way back to the station. My knee was acting up again, and I was a bit annoyed to find that York station wasn't accessible. They didn't even have escalators, so I had to ascend and descend a maze of staircases to get to the platform I needed.

Again this was just a twenty-minute train ride. This time they served drinks, though, and I also got a bag of potato chips. If I'd wanted, I could have actually ordered a full meal. A couple across the aisle got curry and rice by the time we got to Doncaster. Also, LNER did scan my pass on this trip.

Since I didn't have an actual dinner on the train, I figured I'd stop at a Subway that I knew was right on the platform at Doncaster station. We got to Doncaster at a quarter to five. I went straight to Subway, but the employee there told me they were closed. I then thought I'd see what was in the food court of the Frenchgate shopping mall. There's a lot of stuff, but almost everything closed at 3pm—if it was open at all on Sunday. The only thing that was open in the mall was a Chinese noodle bar. That didn't sound good, so I made my way back to the hotel.

There was an ad in the room showing the menu of the hotel restaurant. One of the things they advertised was "traditional Sunday roast" served from 12 – 6pm for just £11.99. Sunday roast features the classic Yorkshire pudding (basically a popover with gravy), and that seemed an appropriate thing to have in Yorkshire. When I went downstairs, though, I found that the restaurant had closed at 5pm; apparently the ad was out of date. I really didn't feel like walking anywhere more distant, so my supper tonight ended up being the rest of the Penguins candy I'd bought. I can now answer the question "What did the penguin get from the genie in the lamp?" The answer—"three fishes".

The railway museum is massive, covering two enormous buildings and multiple annexes. It displays nearly two centuries worth of train cars and other exhibits on the logistics of running a railroad and changes in passenger amenities over the years. I was fascinated to find that Britain still manufactured steam locomotives as late as 1960 and ran them in regular service (mostly on obscure routes) until 1985. It was also interesting to see how train signaling is done, both by hand and electronically. I also was intrigued to see a freight car that was used to carry away rubble that accumulated when they built the channel tunnel. Apparently all the rubble was disposed of in Britain, regardless of where it was dug up in the tunnel.

I stopped briefly at the museum café, though all I bought there was a Fanta Zero. The purchase stood out for two reasons. First I found that Fanta Zero (at least in Britain) doesn't actually have zero calories. Regulations require them to display nutritional information both per 100 milliliters and for the entire can. Fanta Zero has 4 calories per 100 milliliters, and 13 for the entire can. What's more all those calories are identified as coming from sugars. That's still not something that would spike my diabetes, but it is interesting to know.

The can of pop cost £2.85 (about \$3.80), and interestingly pop labeled "zero" cost 5 pence less than full sugar pop. I paid with what I thought was exact change. It turned out, though, that I was due 15 pence back. The 5p coin is actually slightly larger, and it's round rather than octagonal. It doesn't help that Britain (much like the U.S.) primarily uses English words for the value of their coins. Instead of saying the number "20" like most countries would, it says "twenty pence" in tiny etched letters.

MONDAY, JULY 20

DONCASTER, YARM, & REDCAR, ENGLAND

While I again slept pretty well, I was wide awake before 6am. That's partly due to the latitude in northern Britain. Doncaster is almost exactly as far north as Edmonton, or 1,500 miles further north than Iowa. Even with British Summer Time (the local equivalent of Daylight Savings Time), sunrise is still before 5am in July. While the room has black-out curtains, I'd left a little crack in the middle, and the sun came streaming in right on cue.

I listened to BBC radio, which is one of the channels on the TV here. The big news was that this afternoon the country will be getting a new prime minister. Particularly since Brexit, U.K. politics has been in constant upheaval. Andy Burnham will be the eighth prime minister since 2010 and the fifth since 2020. They played audio of clips from the farewell speeches of all the 21st Century leaders as they left 10 Downing Street. Burnham is unique in coming from a working class area of Liverpool, though like many northerners he moved to the London area when entering politics. He then served as mayor of Manchester and worked with business to help attract high tech businesses to that city. It will be interesting to see how he gets on as the national leader.

I also spent a while going through my brother Paul's weekly letter. It was weird to read that on Monday, since he generally sends his letter by e-mail on Sunday afternoons. Whatever the day, it was good to get caught up with the family.



Doncaster Miners' Memorial

I left the hotel shortly after 7am. On the way to the station I saw a few of downtown Doncaster's attractions—such as they are. The only real attraction is Doncaster Minster (the Church of St. George), which has minimal hours and has never been open when I've been around. Aside from that, there are quite a few murals that attempt to brighten up the place. There's also a monument to coal miners who were killed on the job. Mining was the biggest industry in the area historically, but that stopped nearly fifty years ago. Today they do a lot of food processing, warehousing, and trucking—the same sort of industries you find in Cedar Rapids, which is about the same size as Doncaster.

I waited briefly at the station and boarded the 7:42 northbound LNER train, which had a destination of Aberdeen, Scotland. I wasn't going anywhere close to that far. In fact, just like yesterday, I'd be getting off at York. Unlike yesterday, they did manage to feed me during the twenty-minute trip. I had coffee and orange juice, and also a bacon roll (literally just bacon on a roll—I had it dry, but they suggest you have it with “brown sauce”). They served everything very efficiently, so I was able to finish everything before we got to York.

Today I had about a half-hour layover at York station before transferring to another train. I'd never consider such a short transfer time on Amtrak; it would guarantee a missed connection. Here people schedule 10-minute transfers all the time. The trains generally do run on time, and even the “late” trains aren't all that far behind schedule. What's more, there's almost always another train coming if you do miss your connection.

The train I was connecting to actually was late, so I ended up waiting about forty minutes at York. Mostly I was entertained by absolutely constant announcements. Trains arrive every few minutes, and they tell the platform, the number of cars, all the stops each one will be calling at, and the services available on the train. In the rare event that there's a break from those announcements, the recorded voices (one male and one female) will go into various safety spiels. The most common of those encourages people to text the British Transport Police “61016”. That number looks like a ZIP-code (in fact it is the code for an area near Rockford, Illinois. It's invariably read with three parts, though: 6 – 100 – 6”. The safety messages always end with the words “See it! Say it! Sorted!”—the British equivalent of “If you see something, say something.”

Eventually my next train came. This was a local service run by Trans-Pennine Express. This company connects the eastern and western parts of northern England, cutting across the Pennine Mountains that are the island's spine. This train had originated in Manchester, and presumably it got a few minutes behind while it was crossing those mountains.

The first-class car on this train was completely empty. I had a reserved seat, so I took my rightful place there. There was no food served on the train, but I did get a complimentary bottle of water (branded Harrowgate, and claiming to be “from England's oldest spa”). The seats were also further apart, and of course with no one else in the car, it was very quiet.

The land around both Doncaster and Yarm is extremely flat, but as we progressed north from Yarm it became quite a bit hillier. There were lots of livestock around here, mostly cows and horses. We even passed a pair of horses who happened to be mating this morning.

While the land looks rural, there are massive power lines cutting across the countryside. Several of England's largest urban areas (Leeds, Sheffield, Newcastle, Hull, and the Stockton—Middlesborough area) are quite close to here, and there are many smaller cities as well, like Doncaster and York. There's a massive nuclear power plant right by York, and there's also nearly as many wind turbines as you'd find in Iowa.

My ultimate destination this morning was the Yarm, a "village" that's larger than Algona and well off the tourist radar. Yarm is technically considered a suburb of Stockton, and it's governed through the same metropolitan government as that grimy industrial city. People who know my family will know the reason I came to Yarm. When I was a child my mother wrote to penpals around the world. The one she knew best was a woman who went as "Chick" (though I think her name was actually Ethel) Anderson. Chick and her husband Andy (also a nickname) lived in Yarm. She and my mother regularly wrote back and forth for four decades. My parents visited Chick in England twice, and my sister Margaret and brother Paul also visited Yarm. Later on the Andersons came to visit my family in Mt Pleasant, and having seen Yarm now, Mt. P. is a pretty equivalent place. Chick and Andy are no longer around, and I'm pretty sure her children have moved to southern England. I was still curious to check out Yarm and rediscover its connection to my family.

Yarm station is a park-and-ride way at the south end of town. I had about a two-mile walk to actually get to the town center. Much of what I passed looked remarkably like what I remembered from pictures of Chick's home—lines of brick "terraces" (row houses) and "semis" (duplexes), all built in the immediate postwar period. I was reminded of the old song about "little houses on the hillside that all look just the same". In Yarm they're made of brick rather than "ticky-tacky", but it's the same sort of mass construction that built places like Moline and Urbandale. In recent years some people have combined two rowhouses or merged the halves of a duplex to provide a larger home. There's almost no detached homes in Yarm, though, and no one has more than the tiniest of yards.



Old town hall and high street – Yarm

building in Yarm is the Methodist Church—or at least the original part of that building, which has been added on to multiple times. The original building is octagonal in shape and was built in the 1700s. Methodist founder John Wesley preached there and described it in his journals as "by far the most elegant church in England". I'm sure the original part was quite stately. Today it's surrounded by additions that appear to date from both the 1950s and 1980s, and I don't think Wesley would have quite the same reaction to the modern parts. It does appear to be a thriving church, though.

I walked around much of central Yarm, which combines row houses from the 1800s with brand new apartments and semi-detached homes. The most interesting thing I saw was the Anglican churchyard (i.e., cemetery). The parish that cemetery served either no longer exists or has moved to a new building. The old St. Mary Magdelene Church is now a senior center.

Something that truly dominates the town is the Yarm Viaduct, an enormous bridge built of brick arches that carries the railroad above the Tees valley. Trains run across it every ten minutes or so, and it's held up since the 1852.



Yarm Viaduct

At the north end of Yarm I crossed the Tees River on a much older bridge, a stone bridge that dates to the year 1400 and still carries the main road to central Stockton. They apparently built an iron bridge to replace it in the 1800s, but it collapsed after one year.

Both historically and today the Tees River divides the counties of North Yorkshire and Durham, though that wasn't the case when Chick lived there. In the '70s the British government put through a plan to modernize their counties, and both sides of the Tees Valley were merged into a new county called Cleveland. Apparently no one on either side of the river liked that, and they did away with Cleveland

after about a decade. The borough of Stockton does span both sides of the river, but different parts of it are considered to be in Durham or Yorkshire.

On the Durham side of the river is Egglecliffe, a town slightly larger than Yarm where Chick and Andy moved in their later years. I did a bit of hiking in Egglecliffe. Nothing much stood out there, though, so I made my way back to Yarm.

I didn't really want to walk all the way back to the railway station, so I took a city bus (run by Arriva Northeast) instead. To pay the fare (£3), I had to use a phone app that generated a QR code. It was a pain to get their reader to scan the code, but eventually it beeped and I was officially aboard.

When I walked, it was pretty much a straight shot from the railway station into town. Basically I just followed the main highway. Bus #7, on the other hand, took the most convoluted route imaginable. It made multiple detours to provide direct service to all the different "housing estates". In the end it took nearly the same time as walking would have, but it was certainly less wear and tear on my knees.

When I got to the train station I almost immediately boarded an eastbound Trans-Pennine train. The only reason for that was because the train was running almost twenty minutes late. If it had been on time, I'd have waited for more than half an hour for the next one.

No one had scanned my pass on either of the trains earlier this morning, but this time around a man in a vest that said "revenue protection" made sure I had properly paid. Everything was in order, though he seemed surprised that someone with a pass would ride on this particular route. This train was all standard class, but I ended up being the only person at a table for four, so I had plenty of space.

We first stopped at Egglecliffe station. From there onward we went through some of the grimmest industrial areas I've seen in a long time. The factories in Stockton and Middlesbrough appear to still be active, but they're "old school" factories in crumbling brick buildings with metal roofs. Many of them are chemical plants, but they appear to do lots of fabrication here, using metal, plastic, and even concrete to create various goods. The single biggest factory made wind turbines. I found that interesting, since most of those we put up in America are shipped from Asia and then trucked across the country.

East of Middlesbrough are the Yorkshire moors. Chick and Andy would often go "on holiday" in the moors, though it definitely wasn't the part the train went through today. This part (the borough of Redcar and Cleveland, from which the temporary county got its name) is a swampland full of abandoned industry. The Teeside Steelworks extended for miles, but now it's just wasteland with shells of factory buildings on it. We also passed an enormous landfill that looked like mountains rising from the swamp.

My ultimate destination was Redcar Central station, which is between the old and new parts of central Redcar. The recorded voices on the train pronounce the place as if it were a crimson automobile (though their received pronunciation drops the final "r"), but locals pronounce it more like a singular version of Rutgers University.

I first went to the new part of Redcar, which is where pretty much all the business that's done in the town happens. I used an ATM at a Morrison's supermarket. I didn't need more money, but my ATM card will expire at the end of July, and I want to make sure I have money I can use after that happens.

I then had lunch at the Redcar McDonalds, which looks like an American McD's that still has the old mansard roof. The weirdest part of the place was that the drive-through was on the "wrong" side of the building, since of course drivers need to access the window from the right side of their car.

Neither my credit nor my debit card worked at the McDonalds kiosk, so I paid cash at the counter instead. I got the quarter-pounder value meal, which had more choices than it would in the States. I could choose a salad instead of fries, for instance (which made my lunch somewhat more healthy). There were also some unique choices for drinks. I chose apple-flavored Sprite Zero.

Like many fast food kiosks, this one asked customers to enter a table tent number for "eat in" orders. Another customer used the kiosk facing mine, and we both entered the same number before either of us actually took the table tent. They delivered both orders to my table, and it took a while to get everything sorted out.

The new part of central Redcar is a collection of strip malls with the same sorts of businesses you'd find on an American strip. The main difference is that the big box stores have parking ramps instead of lots, and in most cases the parking isn't free. It's all been built in the 21st Century, and while it's a bit tacky, there's nothing particularly bad about it.

On the other hand, the old part of central Redcar is more than a bit sad. It has the same sort of buildings they had in Yarm, but the majority are standing empty and have been badly cared for. The businesses that are open are mostly second-hand stores run by various charities. For some reason there's also lots and lots of barbers. I don't think I've ever seen so many barbers in close proximity in my life.

In Victorian times Redcar was a beach resort. The beach is still there, but it's badly run-down. I'm sure it doesn't help that all that industry throughout the Tees valley drains its industrial waste into the harbor here. That said, it was still kind of cool to get my first

view of the North Sea. I didn't join the locals in sunbathing in the chilly weather, but I did snap a few photos and then made my way back to the station.

I snapped a picture of a red car in Redcar, and I also got some pictures of a couple of cars' license plates. British license plates (technically called "registration plates") are generally the long style that is typical in Europe. They always have black text and can have either a white or yellow background. The plates are made of plastic rather than metal. They're supplied by the dealer that originally sold the car, and that dealer's name appears at the bottom of the plate. They seem to feature random combinations of letters and numbers, with no real patterns at all. The majority of the plates only have the registration number and dealer information, but about a third also have a flag and country code on them. The country could be shown as "UK" or "GB" (both with the union jack), or it could be "EN" (with the red cross of St. George from the English flag). I assume it must also be possible to get plates for Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, but I haven't seen any of those.

Right by Redcar Central station there's a level crossing where the train tracks cross a major highway. They definitely err on the side of safety with train crossings in Britain. A full minute before a train approaches lights flash and a horrible noise sounds. Then a protective barrier fence slides all the way across the road so neither cars nor pedestrians can try to get around. Once the train passes, the barrier slides back and the lights and sound cease.

For variety I took a very cramped Northern train westward to Darlington, another place the size of Cedar Rapids that's located just west of Yarm and Egglecliffe. Much of this route follows the first passenger train line in the world, the Stockton and Darlington Railway, which opened in 1825. I wondered what it would have been like to travel by train 201 years ago.

Past the industrial wasteland, the route to Darlington is a weird mix of rural and industrial land. In the heart of it is Teeside Airport. The airport has regular flights, mostly to resort destinations in Spain. What stood out, though, was that it's also home to a place that claims to be the world's largest airplane painters. Airplanes are bought and sold all the time, and apparently when that happens most of them fly to northeast England to be rebranded.

I really didn't see much of Darlington itself. The station is in the middle of a big rail yard. The downtown area is supposedly quite close, but I couldn't figure out how to get there. The station itself is quite nice, though, and I killed about half an hour there before catching my final train of the day.

For the final leg I was back on LNER, and this was by far the busiest train of the day. First class seemed to mostly be filled by a tour group of elderly couples who were headed to York. The car was nearly full until we got there, but then it emptied out.



Wind turbines along the North Sea coast – Redcar



Typical British registration plates

I wasn't sure if I'd get food on this ride or not, since it was a mid-afternoon trip. It turned out they did give me a second lunch. I had their vegan option, which was a very nice pasta with a bean and mushroom sauce. I also had a can of Pepsi Max (their sugar-free cola product) and what they called a "dessert pot" of unidentifiably flavored pink pudding.

While working on this back at the hotel, I had a second dinner. At Darlington station I'd bought a "meal deal" from a newsstand. Meal deals are big in Britain. Every supermarket, convenience store, and even drug store sells them. They consist of a "main" (I got a ham and cheese sandwich, but it could also be a wrap, a falafel, or a cheese board), a beverage, and a side (mine was pretzels, but it could also be chips, candy, or a salad). They're generally priced around £4, which is much cheaper than the three items would be if bought separately. In addition to writing on this, I also watched BBC News and the British version of *House Hunters*—where a couple was buying a cottage in Scotland for £950,000.

TUESDAY, JULY 21

DONCASTER TO NEWCASTLE, ENGLAND

I again set my alarm for 6:30, but this time I slept in until just a couple minutes before it would have sounded. I showered and quickly finished packing my stuff, and I was out the door shortly after 7:00.

I was booked on the same train I'd been on yesterday, the 7:42 LNER service that would terminate at Aberdeen. Both the LNER app and the announcements in the station said this would leave from platform 4, so it was a bit of a surprise to see a northbound Azuma train pull in on platform 3 (normally used by southbound trains) at 7:40. I double-checked that it was indeed my train and hurried to board. I wouldn't be surprised if some passengers missed the train because of the platform change.

This train served the "signature" menu that included the full English breakfast. Not being a fan of runny eggs, tomatoes, or blood sausage, I opted for another bacon roll instead. The food really is a good value of having gotten the first-class train pass. It cost about \$150 more than standard class, but in two weeks I'm pretty sure I'll have gotten more value than that just from the meals. The three breakfasts and dinner I've had so far would likely be \$50 or more if purchased from station concessions.

This morning we definitely did not have the "ten-minute sit" at York they described on one of the earlier trains I'd taken. I'm pretty sure we were stopped there for less than a minute. For the most part the stops on British trains are quite quick, much faster than those on Amtrak.

My travel phone always tries to use wi-fi rather than mobile data if it's available, so I attempted to use LNER's free internet. Unfortunately, it requires a sign-in page, and that page kept crashing. I had to turn off wi-fi entirely to get the phone to use data the way it should.

It surprised me that there were several seats in this car that had been reserved, but for which no passengers showed up. There is no charge for seat reservations in the U.K., so I suppose some people must make multiple reservations and take the train that happens to fit their schedule best. It is kind of weird that they allow so many no-shows, though.

North of Darlington there was more farm country. This was mostly grazing land, with lots of cattle and sheep. I also saw a number of outdoor hog lots. Aside from hay there were no crops being grown here, though.

We reached Newcastle shortly before 9am, slightly ahead of schedule. Unlike Doncaster and York, the station in Newcastle has exit barriers where you're supposed to scan your ticket. I put the QR code for my BritRail pass up to the reader, and it flashed "not valid for this leg of journey". Fortunately there was a security guard near the gate. I showed her the pass, and she just opened the barrier without blinking.

I had a point redemption at a Hampton inn that is right across the street from the main entrance to Newcastle station. It's a restored historic building (the Baron's Quarters), and it couldn't be more convenient. I went to reception (which is on the second floor) and asked if they could store my bags. Surprisingly, they actually gave me a room at 9:00 in the morning. The desk clerk (a young man named Harry) profusely apologized that it wasn't the seventh floor room I had requested on their app. I was delighted to have any room at all six hours before the official check-in time, and I quickly made my way up to the fifth floor and got settled.

I spent pretty much the whole day exploring various things in the Newcastle area. I bought a £7.50 day pass that was valid for everything operated by Travel North East—including the Tyne & Wear Metro, ferries across the Tyne River, commuter trains to nearby areas in Durham and Northumbria, and buses in three different counties of extreme northeast England. I didn't take the ferry, but I did make multiple trips on the metro and an excursion by bus.

I caught a train up to Monument (just one stop north of Newcastle Central) and transferred to a train with the destination "South Shields, via Whitley Bay". Both were yellow line trains, but there was a reason to transfer. The yellow line follows a very odd route that's

basically a circle that crosses over itself. (I was on a similar line in Japan last year, and it was also confusing.) I will say that navigating an unfamiliar system is much easier when everything is in English.

I exited at Wallsend station. Named after a neighborhood that used to be home to the largest shipbuilding plant in Europe, the name comes from the fact that this was literally the end of Hadrian's Wall, the boundary that marked the northern extent of the Roman Empire. Building on that fact, a number of signs (like the "no smoking" and platform number signs) are bilingual in English and Latin. It's a cute touch that makes an otherwise nondescript station interesting.

I headed two blocks south of Wallsend station to my first destination of the day, Segedunum. This is the ruins of a Roman fort that was built about 1900 years ago where Hadrian's Wall met the Tyne River estuary. It's understandably a world heritage site, though it's run by the local government of metro Newcastle. I paid my £5.50 admission and spent a little over an hour checking out the place.

They start by taking you up to the top of a modern tower where you can check out the grounds of the fort and the mostly abandoned shipbuilding facility beyond there. They still repair ships in Newcastle, but they haven't built new ones since 1980. Then they have a museum with exhibits of artifacts that were found here (most notably the "diplomas" written in ink on metal that identified senior soldiers as Roman citizens). They also have a film that explains what life was like from the perspective of various people in and around the fort.

The name Segedunum is a Latinized version of a place used by the ancient Celtic natives. The name meant "strength" and "victory" in the ancient local language, and the Romans wanted to convey that idea to the people they were occupying. At the time there were more than 600 Romans there, as well as their slaves and locals who serviced the fort.

The Romans abandoned Segedunum around the year 400 A.D. The buildings collapsed and for more than a millennium the area was just overgrown. Its history had been forgotten, to the point that in Queen Victoria's time the government built public housing for mine workers on the site. I could see some of those lines of 19th Century rowhouses just across the street (called Hadrian's Road, by the way) from Segedunum.

The grounds of Segedunum are ruins. They mark where the walls of buildings stood and note that some the Romans built forts to essentially the same plan all over Europe. They have found the actual foundations of some buildings and even things like the bottoms of pillars. The only actual building they have is a reconstruction of a Roman bath which they note is in a different location from where it originally stood. (The actual site is now privately owned land where a pub is located.) Even though the place is basically just a bunch of stones, there's still a definite sense of history there. I was very glad I saw it.



Fragment of Hadrian's Wall

There are a few remnants of Hadrian's Wall itself in Wallsend and all over Newcastle. I saw a couple places, one of which was ruins much like the fort and another that was looked like a low hill covered with grass. Further west there are apparently fairly long stretches where the original stone wall is still standing. The National Trust encourages people to walk the 74-mile trail beside the wall. I'm sure that would be interesting, but it would be a bit much for me.

After visiting the fort I spent a while walking around the business area of Wallsend. Some of it is very modern (like a brand new Asda, the British equivalent of Walmart, which was once even owned by the American chain). Most of it seems to date to the Victorian era, though, and it's quite a lively area. The people of Wallsend today seem very multiethnic, with lots of immigrants from Africa, south Asia, and surprisingly Latin America. I didn't really expect to hear Spanish in northern England, but I heard several people speaking it.

I made my way into a very down-market mall that had a name that made me laugh. Here in the shadow of Hadrian's Wall was a shopping mall called the Forum. It was mostly full of charity shops and discount stores, but it was still fun to walk around.

I had lunch at the Forum at one of the biggest chains in Britain, Gregg's. This is a chain of bakeries that was founded in Newcastle and now has more than a thousand locations all over the country. Their blue and yellow signs are everywhere, and people seem to love them. I figured I should see what all the fuss was about.

I got Gregg's meal deal, which included a ploughman sandwich (aged cheddar cheese and every vegetable you could find in the farmers' market on a delicious crusty bun), their signature sausage roll (my least favorite item, but Brits seem to love sausage far more than I do), and a Diet Coke. I also got another of their specialties, a cheese and onion bake. That was basically an empanada with cheese and caramelized onions melted inside puff pastry. While I won't buy a sausage roll again, I was glad to have tried one. Everything else was truly delicious.

I also stopped into a supermarket called Iceland. This has nothing to do with Reykjavik; the name comes from the fact that they specialize in frozen food. They have everything you'd expect in any grocery store, though, and modern standards the prices are rock bottom. Lots of stuff cost just a pound, and they had good looking meat (beef, pork, and lamb) at three pounds (as in weight) for £5 of



Latin at Wallsend

money. (The meat is advertised in imperial weights, but the packaging lists the weight it in grams.) That works out to about US\$1.35 for a pound of meat—way less than even hamburger costs these days back home.

Wallsend was one of several places I saw a “petrol” station. Gas in Britain is sold by the liter (which they spell “litre”), and the going rate is about £1.50. That’s around \$7.30 per gallon, so I guess we should be thankful for the \$4 gas we’ve had in the States recently. The main brands of fuel here are Esso and Shell, and a lot of the stations also have electric fast charging on site in addition to selling fuel.



Lobby at Whitley Bay metro station

From Wallsend I caught a train eastward to Whitley Bay. While everything here is essentially part of Newcastle, Whitley Bay was historically another beach resort like Redcar. Whitley Bay has aged a lot better, though. It doesn’t have a sandy beach like Redcar, but it offers much nicer views of the North Sea.



“Selfie” at Whitley Bay

I continued around the circle part of the yellow line. Boarding with me at Whitley Bay were some passengers with special needs. One was a high school aged boy named Bobby who was travelling with “me auntie”. He didn’t say much himself, but his aunt let everyone in the car know how much he loved trains. In fact next weekend she’s taking him on a trip to York so he can see the railway museum I was just at. Presumably Billy will be more impressed than I was.

The other special needs person was an adult I’d estimate to be in his thirties. He was apparently deaf, but he clearly also had some mental problems. The guy was riding with two different women who I think were from a care center he probably lives at. When it came time for them to exit, the guy was confused because the doors opened on a different side than he was expecting. He seemed frightened by that and refused to leave the train. The women apparently weren’t allowed to touch him, so they spent about six stops negotiating with him before they could finally leave.

I rode past Newcastle Central station and onto the other leg that extends out from the circle. I crossed the Tyne on one of several massive downtown bridges and got off at Gateshead Interchange on the south side of the river. There I transferred to bus #21. This was one of those classic double-decker buses you associate with England. It might have been fun to sit upstairs, but I really didn’t want to negotiate narrow steps in a moving vehicle. So I took one of the seats marked “priority” on the lower level.

I was glad I had my phone with me, because there were no announcements at all made on this bus. This bus makes a straight route down Durham Road, but I didn’t know exactly how long it would take to reach my destination. Fortunately I was able to follow our position on Google Maps, so I knew the correct time to press the “stop” button. I got out just before a roundabout where the old route of highway A-1 (Durham Road) intersects the A-1-M motorway.



Angel of the North

I was here to see one of Britain’s most viewed attractions, if far from its most famous one. Right alongside the motorway is the Angel of the North, an enormous sculpture of rusted steel that depicts an angel giving its blessing to the freeway and to passengers on East Coast Main Line trains. (I’d seen it from the train this morning, but I wanted to see the thing up close.) While a fraction of the height of the enormous Buddhist goddess I saw in Japan, it’s still a very impressive statue.

There’s essentially a freeway rest area (though with only porta-potties) at the base of the angel, and it appears to get constant visitors. In the scrub land at the bottom of the hill lots of makeshift shrines have been erected, the sort of thing you might see where people died in a car crash. I wasn’t expecting those, and they were fascinating to see.

I snapped the mandatory photos and also got an ice cream from a vendor who’d parked a truck at the rest area. Then I headed to the northbound rest area and retraced my steps back to Newcastle. This time the bus

had announcements for every stop, though it really wouldn’t have mattered in this direction. Gateshead Interchange is the one stop that’s not on Durham Road, so it’s pretty obvious where that is.

While it had been downright cold most of the morning (13 degrees Celsius, or 55 Fahrenheit), the sun came out and it heated up quite a bit in the afternoon. (I believe the high was 22 degrees Celsius, which is about 72 Fahrenheit. Being close to the sea, it was also extremely humid, so I was sweating when I got back to the hotel. I spent about an hour relaxing and cooling off before setting off again.

In the late afternoon I saw some of downtown Newcastle's attractions. One of these, of course, is the castle for which the place was named. All that's left of the castle is the entryway (called the black gate) and the keep, which looks quite a lot like the Tower of London. I didn't pay £16 to go inside, and I don't think I really missed out on that much.

I also saw Newcastle's Anglican cathedral (the Church of St. Nicholas). This is the sort of creepy, dark cathedral I was expecting at York Minster. It also has oddly modern furnishings that don't really go with the thousand-year-old architecture. It was free, though, and I did enjoy looking at the beautiful windows.

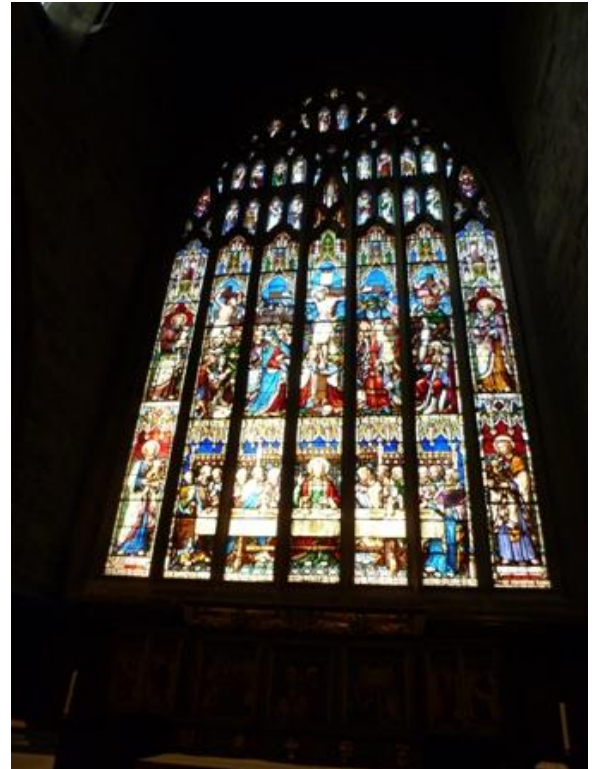
The other main attraction in central Newcastle is Grey's Monument. This is named after Charles Grey, a Victorian prime minister who came from Northumberland, which used to be the county Newcastle was in. (Tyne and Wear was a recent creation like Cleveland, but people seem to like it much more than they did down in Yorkshire.) He was the Grey for whom Earl Grey tea was named, though a far more important accomplishment is that he abolished slavery throughout the British Empire. The monument is actually taller than the Angel of the North, though most of its height comes from a pedestal.

Clearly, aside from Segedunon, the attractions in Newcastle aren't all that important. That said, I really liked the city. It's a vibrant, young city where today the biggest employer is the National Health Service's research labs. It's also home to several universities, and there seems to be a very lively arts scene. York was a nice place to visit, but Newcastle is a place I can imagine people actually living and enjoying their lives. It's definitely the most fun place I've been so far.

For dinner tonight I had what the Brits would call "a cheeky Nando's". African peri-peri chicken is extremely popular here, to the point that I could have eaten at a dozen of Nando's competitors. Tonight I had a quarter chicken (thigh and leg), together with garlic bread and a delicious slaw made with about as many different vegetables as the ploughman sandwich I had at lunch. I was delighted that my credit card actually worked at Nando's, though I did get an e-mail from the bank suspecting fraud. If America would just switch to the chip and PIN system they use pretty much everywhere else on earth, this wouldn't be a problem at all. I have no clue why our banks haven't made that switch.

I'm going to throw one more picture into today's write-up. It shows a pedestrian crossing near the Earl Grey Monument. I've already been through tons of British crosswalks, but I must say they've taken some getting used to. What's strangest is that the "green man" isn't across the street like you'd see in America. Instead it's right beside you, on the box where you press the button saying you want to cross. Sometimes pressing the button immediately makes traffic stop, while other times it takes forever to have the desired effect. Weirdest of all, I've seen several intersections where traffic from every direction is stopped, but the pedestrian light is still red. Technically jaywalking is not a crime in the United Kingdom, and lots of people just cross at will (particularly in a city full of younger people like Newcastle). The drivers often honk at those who do, but they also honk if the car light turns red when they want to keep on going.

In the evening I alternated between writing on this journal and doing laundry. I didn't really need to do laundry, but it was a convenient time to do it. I had hoped the Hampton Inn would have a coin washer and dryer, but this location doesn't. Instead I washed the clothes in the bathroom sink and dried them with the iron. They'll probably still be damp tomorrow, but so be it. While I did check a bag, I certainly didn't pack enough to get through a three-week trip without washing.



Window depicting the crucifixion
Newcastle Cathedral



"Green Man"

WEDNESDAY, **J**ULY 22

NEWCASTLE, ENGLAND TO STIRLING & GLASGOW, SCOTLAND

I was up about 6:15 this morning, and I immediately discovered that I must have left my electric shaver in Doncaster the previous morning. Fortunately it was a cheap model I'd had for years. It would still need to be replaced, though, and of course I'd have to run

around with stubble today. While the rough loo is popular these days, I've been clean-shaven for forty years now. I don't care much for either the look or feel of stubble.

Breakfast was included at the Hampton Inn, and they had quite a spread—albeit different than what the chain would serve back home. The part I liked the best was the Nordic buffet I had in Iceland years ago—cold slices of real cold ham and various varieties of cheese. There was also bread to make sandwiches with those, but I just ate them plain. I also had some scrambled eggs, a dish of mandarin oranges (which were intended to be eaten with yogurt), a croissant with butter and orange marmalade, and the item they call tri-taters at school lunch that the British think of as hashbrowns. They also had the majority of the ingredients in a full English breakfast (though I heard someone complaining that the tomatoes and black pudding were missing), various cereals, fruits of all sorts, and beans on toast. I remember my Aunt Alaire making that final item, something she learned to like during the Depression. Apparently Brits think of it as a comfort food and will have it at any time of day.

The breakfast buffet also featured jugs of various kinds of juice and the electronic coffee machines that are ubiquitous in Britain. For these you press a button and choose one of numerous possible items, most of which are more milk and sugar than coffee. The Holiday Inn Express in Oak Park had the same type of machine (even branded with Costa Coffee). I suppose that makes sense, since IHG (which owns Holiday Inn) is a British chain. It seems a bit weird to me that snooty coffee bars in Britain have those exact same machines; it's not like the baristas are actually doing anything themselves.

I double-checked to make sure I hadn't left anything behind in the room this morning and then made my way across the street to Newcastle station. Once again my pass wouldn't scan correctly, and the guard seemed surprised that I'd expected it would. Once I was in the protected side of the station I noticed a Boots shop, part of a pharmacy chain owned by the same company that owns Walgreen's. The train station location had lots of make-up, over-the-counter drugs, and meal deal foods, but no electric shavers (nor really any other products aimed at men). I'll need to find a larger store later to get what I need.

My train this morning was scheduled to leave from Platform 2. There were signs all over the station for platforms 3 through 11, but nothing for 1 or 2. Eventually I asked a guard and found that the unlabeled platform right by the barrier gates was in fact Platform 2. I guess people were just supposed to know that.

Today would be my final journey with LNER, this time the 8:05 Azuma service up to Edinburgh. I chose to have the crumpets again, as well as coffee and apple juice. The car was surprisingly loud this morning, the loudest of the first class carriages I'd been on. The loudest person was an LNER employee who was being repositioned to take a train south from Edinburgh.

The countryside was quite different today than on my previous trips on the East Coast Main Line. Newcastle is the northernmost place of significance in England (at roughly the same latitude as Ketchikan, Alaska), and the county of Northumberland north of there is extremely rural. It's also very hilly and much more forested than things are further south. That made for a much prettier trip.

At our first stop this morning (Alnmouth) a guy with an extremely Scottish accent boarded the train. I'd easily understood everyone I'd encountered so far in this trip, but his accent was quite a challenge. He thought I was sitting in his seat. I had a seat reservation for Car L, Seat 14, and the indicator above the seat said it was reserved from Newcastle to Edinburgh. Apparently the guy always chooses this particular seat when he travels, and it was difficult for him to accept that it was occupied. The car attendant pointed out to him that his reservation was for a seat in Car K rather than Car L, but he let the guy choose any available seat. The man grumbled and took seat 13, directly behind me.



Coastline near Berwick-upon-Tweed

As we reached the north edge of England we travelled right along the North Sea coast. At about a quarter to nine we reached Berwick-upon-Tweed, which is essentially the Scottish border. The town has actually changed between being in England and Scotland numerous times in its history. Technically it's English today, but the official Scottish border is just a couple miles to the north. Supposedly in the early 20th Century no one actually knew which country Berwick (pronounced BARE-ick) was in, so Britain's official declaration of war in World War I proclaimed that Germany was at war with England, Scotland, and Berwick-upon-Tweed.

The land in Scotland looks a lot like Northumberland, but the towns look very different. That's mostly due to the construction materials. England is almost universally built of brick, except for modern buildings made of steel and glass. In Scotland, on the other hand, things are either bare stone or covered with stucco. There's also farm houses built of wood, while in England those too are brick. They seem to like tile roofs in Scotland, too. That surprised me, since I associate tile with Mediterranean countries.

We got to Edinburgh Waverley station shortly after 9:30. I used a very overcrowded bathroom there and then made my way to another platform to transfer to a ScotRail train. This was a rather cramped train, and not luxurious at all. There were no reserved seats;

in fact, the seats weren't numbered at all. There also wasn't any first class section, since this was regional train just shuttled people between their homes, jobs, and shopping.

As we left Waverley we passed through a tunnel and then we were in a break between the steep granite bluffs that seem to make up most of Edinburgh. While it would make for a formidable place to build a castle, I'd think it must have been horrible to build on.

ScotRail doesn't go as fast as LNER, but we were still going faster than traffic on a parallel motorway. Unfortunately we stopped at almost a dozen stations, which meant it took nearly an hour to cover about thirty miles.

I was amused by a girl across the aisle from me. She was applying make-up, and she used the selfie camera on her phone as a mirror to make sure the make-up looked right. I suppose that would work, but it would never have occurred to me that the camera could substitute for a mirror.

I quickly noticed that the station signs on ScotRail have the names in both English and Scottish. They're far from equal languages, though. The Scottish is in small italic type, while the English is in big bold type. Also, the station names are the only place where they do anything at all in Scottish. All the other signage and all the announcements are in English only.

Once we were out of the immediate Edinburgh suburbs, the route was really quite beautiful. There were wildflowers everywhere, and lots of trees and grassland. The little towns were rather dumpy, but the countryside was very attractive. There are also walking trails all over the countryside, and people appear to use them, even in the middle of the day on weekday.

Eventually we got to Stirling, where I'd made reservations at another Premier Inn. Stirling was the only place I could find in the urban part of Scotland that was both close to transportation and reasonably affordable. That said this would be the single most expensive place I'd be staying on this trip—well over £100 a night. In Edinburgh even the cheapest hotels were over £200, and prices were jacked up in Glasgow as well because that city is hosting the Commonwealth Games starting tomorrow. Stirling is just half an hour from Glasgow and a little under an hour from Edinburgh, so it made a reasonable place to stay.

I followed Google Maps' directions to the hotel. They were essentially driving directions, taking me well out of the way to a bridge that crossed over the railroad tracks. I ended up dragging my luggage for about twenty minutes. Fortunately I'd find there was a pedestrian shortcut that made for about a five-minute trip. It even has elevators, so it should be an easy way back to the station with my luggage when I leave.

Check-in was reasonably efficient, and I was given a key to Room 127. It took me a moment to realize that this was on what Americans would call the second floor. Elevators in Britain invariably have level 0 at street level, with 1, 2, 3, etc. above. If there's a basement, it will be labeled -1. The room seems a bit older and more worn than the one I had in Doncaster but there's really nothing wrong with it at all.

I dumped my stuff and took the pedestrian footbridge across the train tracks to Stirling city centre. While Stirling was important in Scottish history, I really didn't see much of it. I could see the castle and cathedral looming on a hill above the city, but I didn't have time to visit or to see either of them up close. The main thing I did was to go to a downtown shopping mall called the Thistles. I first stopped at a Royal Bank of Scotland ATM, where I picked up some more money. While Bank of England notes are perfectly spendable in Scotland, the local banks actually print their own bills. While they have different people featured on them (and the monarch isn't on Scottish money at all), they're completely interchangeable with the regular U.K. bills—to the point that a self-checkout I used later accepted both as if they were exactly the same.

My next stop was where I spent much of the money I'd gotten from the ATM. I found the Boots location at the Thistles and did find electric shavers. While the whole department claimed to be 50% off, their prices in pounds were about the same as the numbers I'd expect in dollars at an American store—which is to say they were about a third more expensive than they'd be back home. (It's actually slightly closer than that, because tax isn't included in America, but it is—at a rate of 20%—in the U.K.) Beggars can't be choosers, though, and I did find one that would work for me.

I was amused at how they handled security at Boots. Instead of putting electronic anti-shoplifting tags on all the expensive goods, what they did instead was to put empty boxes on the shelves. The actual products were stored in the back room. A sign directed me to "ask an employee at the till" to get the box filled. Boots has exclusively self-checkout, but there was a woman monitoring six different registers, and she gladly got my shaver.

Earlier I remarked that Newcastle came across as a young city. Stirling, by contrast, is a town of blue-hairs. The sidewalks were clogged with people using walkers and electric scooters and others waddling around much slower than I was going with a bum knee. Perhaps most annoying was that they'd stop right in the middle of the sidewalk to check their cell phones or to chat with each other, blocking the way for everybody else.

Something I've noticed all over Britain is the huge number of elderly people with unusual hair colors and tattoos. I've come to expect that on twenty-somethings, but it just looks weird when people are in their '60s. It does make me wonder what they were up to forty years ago.

I went back to the hotel and was surprised to find that the shaver had a continental European plug (one with two round pins, rather than the three big boxy plugs they use in Britain). Fortunately the voltage converter I travel with will basically convert to and from any plug type. I gave the shaver the minimum possible charge and finally was able to have my daily shave. Then I'd let it charge to full while I was out for the day.

I made my way back to the train station, but I ended up missing the train I'd intended to catch. That's because the ScotRail app and the digital signs in the station showed two different platforms for that train. I figured the station signs were correct, but in fact the app was what had it right. Fortunately trains between Stirling and Glasgow are very frequent (about every 15 minutes), and the train I ended up catching was an express train that ran non-stop.

This ScotRail train did have a first class car, and I probably had the most comfortable train seat I've had so far on this trip. First class passengers also received complimentary water (from Highland Springs) and Scottish shortbread. There also was a trolley service with other snacks and beverages, but those were for sale rather than free.



Kelvinhall station – Glasgow subway

city park, and the rest is in what they call “glass houses” that are like the conservatories they have in Chicago. It was interesting, though nothing I hadn't seen before. It was also crowded with families who were taking their kids there during the time they call “the school holidays”.

My next destination was also crowded with kids. I went took the subway to Govan station and then walked to the Riverside Museum. This is one of several museums run by the city of Glasgow. The one I really wanted to see (about life in the city through the years) was closed for renovations, so the remaining choices were an old hospital (which would close within half an hour), an art museum, and a transportation museum—which is the one I went to. They have a very extensive collection, although the displays are crammed into a surprisingly small space. I was particularly interested in a number of specialty vehicles, like an ambulance from the 1980s or a tiny car designed for one person and marketed as being a teenager's first wheels.

I rode the subway one stop shy of Buchanan Station, so I missed doing the entire loop, but I did see every station. Mind you, there's not really anything to see in the subway; it's all underground. It was fun, though, and an efficient way to get around the city.

It was certainly faster than walking. While Glasgow is another young city, the sidewalks everywhere were absolutely crammed with people who seemed to be oblivious that other people were around. I couldn't begin to count the number of people who were having Facetime conversations on their phone while they were walking around. There were also large groups of college kids who waked three and four abreast, basically not letting oncoming people pass at all. Finally there's a huge number of homeless people (or just beggars) blocking the sidewalks in Glasgow. What stood out was that almost all them were young. I expect to see old, grizzled men begging, but in Glasgow the majority of the street people were college-aged girls. I assume they'd gotten into drugs, but I really don't know.

The last place I explored in Scotland's largest city was the downtown shopping district. Pretty much every British city puts America to shame with their lively downtowns. I went to a gift shop and a T.K. Maxx (the same company as America's T.J. Maxx, but with an altered name for trademark reasons), but any

I got to Glasgow's Queen Street station shortly after 1pm. I made my way across the street to the entrance of Buchanan Street station on the Glasgow Subway. Glasgow has the third oldest subway system on earth (after Budapest and London), though the system has basically not changed in 130 years. It has a single line that runs in a circle (with no extra legs) with what they call inner and outer loops. It takes exactly half an hour to make it around the loop, and that together with its color on the map have caused locals to dub it “the clockwork orange” (probably a better usage than that phrase has in literature).

Everything about the Glasgow subway is tiny. They dug the smallest tunnels they could get away with, and the trains barely fit inside them. They're just over six feet tall in the middle, and I had to duck to get through the entry doors. Originally every station was built to identical specifications, with an island platform exactly six feet wide. The busiest stations have been retrofitted with larger platforms, but in the ones that still have the original design even the middle of the platform seems scarily close to the edge.

I took a very crowded train down to Hillhead station and from there made a short walk to the Glasgow Botanic Garden. Part of this is an outdoor



Tall ship – Riverside Museum

kind of business you could want was available downtown. There were even multiple supermarkets, which is something you almost never see in an American city center.

I made my way back to Queen Street station and almost immediately caught a train back to Stirling. It was right at rush hour, and the train was standing room only when it left Glasgow. Fortunately it rapidly emptied out, so it wasn't too bad of a trip overall.

I made it back over the footbridge to the hotel. My dinner tonight was a meal deal I'd gotten at a place called Bayne's—Your Family Baker, which was basically Gregg's principal competitor in Glasgow. The main thing I got was a sandwich that was labeled "Mexican chicken", which I mostly bought out of curiosity. It was slices of chicken with a chipotle mayo mixed and topped with lettuce and cilantro. It wasn't bad, but I wouldn't buy one again. I also had some Scottish toffee I bought at the gift shop, which was delicious.

I watched a bit of TV in the evening. I'll sound prudish, but I must say I find much of what is on British TV quite shocking. There was a dating show where the competitors stood behind barricades that were gradually removed to reveal more and more of their nude bodies. They eventually showed full male and female nudity eight on broadcast television (the ITV network). In America we think of the British TV as documentaries and arty shows, and it really caught me by surprise to see them doing adult entertainment. Not only was I shocked by the nudity, but I found it kind of sad that they implied that their bodies were the only "assets" people had to bring to a relationship.

THURSDAY, **J**ULY 23 **STIRLING & EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND**

I was up around six this morning and spent much of the earl morning adding pictures to yesterday's write-up. I'd gotten a note from this particular Premier Inn ahead of time saying that they would be providing a free breakfast (something that's not standard at the chain) because their restaurant was undergoing renovations. I generally don't refuse free food, so I stopped by on my way out this morning. It was a very continental spread. I got a croissant, a pain au chocolat, and an americano from their coffee machine. The same thing would have cost about 7 pounds at the coffee shop at the station, so I wasn't going to complain.

I caught a train leaving at 7:04am, headed to Edinburgh. Edinburgh is quite a bit further from Stirling than Glasgow is, so it was right at 8am when we got to Waverley station. The railroad tracks are essentially the division between the "old town" (much of which is roughly 1,000 years old) and the "new town" (which dates to the 1700s). The two parts actually look a lot alike. Everything is three to five story grey stone buildings built into the sides of the hills.

Greeting me on the way out of the train station were what I'd find out later were the Waverley steps, a stone staircase that serves as a street and leads seventy-five steps up from the station to a little plaza at the top. I'd find later that there are ways to completely avoid those steps, but not knowing that at the time, I scaled them. I was glad it was the first thing in the morning.

Near the top of the steps is what they call the Royal Mile, the main drag in the tourist part of Edinburgh. Except for politicians (one end is at the Scots Parliament), I don't think anyone local ever goes here, except possibly to get drunk on a weekend. It is tourist central, though, and while nothing was yet open at 8:30 in the morning, I still heard languages from all over the world.

The Royal Mile runs uphill towards Edinburgh Castle. I had purchased a timed admission to the castle, and the confirmation gave instructions on where to exchange a QR code in my e-mail for actual tickets. I'd hoped to claim those early so I didn't need to worry about it when I needed to go in. Unfortunately, they don't let you do that. Opening time is 9:30, and you can't even claim your tickets until then.

I did a bit of browsing along the royal mile, but with almost nothing open, there was very little I could do there. I ended up going to a little courtyard that actually belonged to an apartment complex and just relaxing on a bench there. While I was there I downloaded the app for the Edinburgh bus system (Lothian Transit) and after multiple issues with my credit card eventually managed to buy a day pass (£6) for the system. It also works on trams, which is what I'd originally planned to take to get to my afternoon destination. Unfortunately a major fire a couple weeks ago made a downtown building the tram runs past structurally unsound. Because of that they only run trams west of downtown, and I needed to go to the east. That made buses my only option.



**Famous statue of economist Adam Smith
with a traffic cone on his head
by St. Giles Cathedral – Edinburgh**

I left the courtyard about 9:15 and made my way past a woman whose job was to scrape gum off the sidewalk. You can tell it's a tourist town when they pay someone to do that. I then saw a long queue and suspected (correctly) that it was the line to pick up prebooked tickets. As I waited I entertained myself watching workers painting window fames on the building we were lined up in front of.



**Scraping gum off the sidewalk
Royal Mile – Edinburgh, Scotland**

really no different than forts I've seen in North America. In fact it's actually quite similar to the Citadel in Halifax.

I really don't get why they can't just scan the QR code in the e-mail for admission. Instead you have to go to a machine which then dispenses tickets with a traditional bar code. I ended up waiting behind a guy who was very obviously a tour guide. He picket up something like forty ticket from the same machine.

Once I had my ticket I queued again, though in a much faster moving line. It led past a portable grandstand they'd set up to watch a performance of the Royal Infantry Tattoo (a drill corps) later today. Eventually someone scanned the real ticket, and I made my way through the arch and past the castle wall.

I was expecting to like Edinburgh Castle, but it was honestly one of the more disappointing things on this trip. Basically it's a big fort built on top of a hill. In fact they still use some of the barracks there today to house modern military personnel. (They'd certainly keep in shape just getting up there.) Except that everything's older and built of stone instead of wood, it's



LEFT: Costumed soldier taking a coffee break



**RIGHT: Keep (where Scottish crown jewels are stored)
Edinburgh Castle**

I'd have probably liked the castle more if it wasn't ridiculously overcrowded. The timed admissions are supposed to limit the crowds, so I'd hate to see what it would be like if they didn't have them. More than half the people there were part of tour groups. I heard tour guides speaking English, Spanish, French, German, and Russian, plus multiple Asian languages and a few European languages I didn't recognize. I was honestly surprised by the number of Spanish-speaking tourists who were vacationing in Scotland, including people from both Spain and Latin America. The guides all held up umbrellas to keep their groups together, and some had the tour members dressed in same-color jackets.

The majority of those who weren't with groups went around with headphones listening to an audio tour I could have bought for ten pounds. I'm not a great fan of audio tours, though, and they seemed to have all the same information on signs. I think the main difference would be that the audio tour would have told me where to go next to go through all the sites efficiently.

I spent a little over an hour at the castle, and I did see pretty much everything there was to see. My brothers who are more interested in history would probably have liked it more. I didn't dislike it, but it was far from my favorite thing—and probably not worth its £30 admission.

When I left the castle, the Royal Mile was (as the Brits would say) positively rammed. Everything was open now, and thousands and thousands of tourists were going from gift shop to gift shop, buying either kilts, tartans, and cashmere sweaters priced at many hundreds of pounds or plastic bagpipes at around fifty. Everybody moved in extreme slow motion, making the place feel more like an amusement park than a city.



Crowd on the Royal Mile

(Note the boy towards the right with an Adidas jacket and a kilt.)

weaving by hand to modern looms. They also showed how fashions and furnishings changed over time.

The rest of the museum is heavily oriented to kids, and I either skipped it or just glanced through things quickly. I actually spent slightly longer at the museum than at the castle, and I did enjoy it more.

I had checked out the bus route I wanted on Google Maps, but I had a bit of an issue finding which of multiple bus stops near the museum was the one I wanted. In the process of figuring that out, I of course missed the bus I wanted, and I had to wait about fifteen minutes for the next one to show up.

I caught bus #35 with the destination "Ocean Terminal" (as opposed to the opposite direction which led to Watt University, named after another great Scotsman, the inventor of the steam engine). Normally this bus runs on the same street as the tram (Prince's Avenue), which is a transitway with no cars on it. Since the fire, though, the buses have been rerouted onto streets that already carry far too much traffic, and that made the route extremely slow. It would take us between five and ten minutes just to get from one downtown stop to the next. The biggest issue with the traffic was all the tour buses. There are multiple competing companies that run "hop on, hop off" bus tours in Edinburgh, and hundred more buses carry people on package tours on the "city sightseeing tour" that fills the time until they can check into their hotel. Multiple times we waited because tour buses were double-parked, and no one could move until they got out of the way.

Traffic got slightly better when we got past the main tourist area, but the traffic still moved very slowly. It was about eight miles to my destination, and the bus took nearly an hour and a half to get there.

I did get a good look at Edinburgh's neighborhoods from the bus. It appears to be a very multi-ethnic city, with lots of black people from commonwealth countries in Africa and the Caribbean. All over the city the buildings look much the same. It's all that same grey stone, and pretty much everybody in the city proper lives in apartments. Only very far out do you get the rowhouses and duplexes that were all over England.

I rode clear to the end of the line at Ocean Terminal. Among other things, this is where cruise ships dock in Edinburgh, though there weren't any there today. I was here to see the royal yacht Britannia, which is permanently docked in Edinburgh harbor. It was more than a bit tricky to where to enter. The ship itself was clearly visible, but what they didn't say on their website was that the actual entrance was inside a shopping mall and casino. Eventually I did figure out where to go, and I made my way aboard.

Britannia was Queen Elizabeth's personal yacht. It was commissioned in 1953, and travelled over a million miles carrying her to 135 countries around the world. She travelled more by ship than by plane and far preferred sailing to flying. Other members of the royal family were often aboard the ship as well, and from time to time she would welcome foreign dignitaries on the yacht. There were also dozens of crew, most of whom were stationed there permanently. The yacht was decommissioned in 1997 because the royal family deemed it too expensive to maintain. The queen was already doing less international travel at that point, and from then on she flew anywhere she needed to be.

The visit begins with a nice museum that gives the history of the ship. I learned that it was built in Edinburgh, which is why it came here to be retired. They have numerous quotes from the queen praising the ship and noting it was the only place where she felt she could truly relax.

They do run this as an audio tour, passing out what look like handsets from princess phones that you hold up to your ears and dial a number at each point of interest to hear the description. I generally dialed the next number while I was walking from one place to another, which made the tour go a bit faster. Most of the explanations were fascinating, though, as were the objects I saw.



LEFT: The Queen's bed
RIGHT: Family pictures in her personal office



Everything on the ship is original, though different parts are from different eras. A couple of rooms are furnished as they would have been in the '50s, a few are from the '90s, and the vast majority is from the 1970s—which is the era that my mind places her majesty. It is interesting to see royal furniture with the same kind of floral upholstery my mother chose when I was growing up. By royal standards the appointments are quite simple, though of course everything is of a quality to suit a queen.

I spent about an hour at the Britannia, and I thoroughly enjoyed the visit. While I'm not really a royalty buff, I always liked Queen Elizabeth, and I felt I got to know her better through this tour.

I caught bus #34 from Ocean Terminal. On this bus trip I sipped a can of Diet Irn-Bru. Irn-Bru is the soft drink of Scotland. It's an orange-colored drink, but the taste is not orange. Having been to Peru, it reminded me a lot of Inca-Cola. In American beverages, it's probably closest to cream soda. I had to try one while in Scotland, but I doubt I'll be having another.

Bus #34 took a different but equally convoluted route and ended up by a back entrance to Waverley station. Interestingly, the back entrance doesn't have fare barriers like the main entrance does. I soon caught a train on a route I'd not yet taken, ending up in the northern suburb of North Queensferry.

I'd come here to see one of the most famous works of Victorian engineering, the Forth Bridge. The Firth of Forth is the estuary on which Edinburgh lies, and for centuries it stood in the way of a direct connection with northeast Scotland. In 1882 construction began on a 1½-mile cantilever iron bridge that connected the two sides of the estuary. Like a lot of things of its era it looks surprisingly graceful and was built to last forever. ScotRail trains still run over the bridge today, which mine did on the way to North Queensferry. Today there are actually three Forth bridges. The original bridge carries the railroad, a suspension bridge from the mid 20th Century mostly carries pedestrian and bike traffic, and a modern cable-stay bridge carries a motorway. All three look quite impressive, but the original definitely wins the gold medal of the bridge competition.



Original Forth Bridge
North Queensbury, Scotland

I caught the next train back to Edinburgh, though I got off at Haymarket rather than going all the way to Waverley station. There I was able to make a quick and easy transfer to a train bound for Stirling. This was another extremely crowded train, and I ended up standing for about half the ride. Even after I got a seat there were others who were standing all the way to Stirling.

Once I sat I was across the aisle from four high school boys who were planning a trip for the following night to go into the city to party. (It is school holidays, and the legal age in Britain is 17, so this was not an unusual thing to do.) It stood out because they'd be discussing hangovers and "chunking" in one breath and then the questions on the national driving test in the next. At least the train would be their designated driver for this trip.

I hadn't had lunch at all today, so I had a comparatively heavy dinner. I ate at a place called GDK. This is a London-based chain whose name is short for "German Doner Kebab". I would probably call their wraps shawarma rather than kabob (and notice the British spelling of the word is different than the American). I got a chicken doner (meat mixed with cabbage and tomato with a tangy sauce. The fillings are placed into a base that's like an unsweetened version of the stuff used for a waffle cone at an ice cream stand. On the side I had tater tots (which they called hash brown puffs) smothered in cheese. Their meal deal came with canned pop, and I got Sprite Zero. It's another of those things that I don't know that I'll try again, but it wasn't a bad meal.

While I finished up writing this chapter of the travelogue in the background I watched the first show on British TV that I actually liked. It's called *24 Hours in A & E*, and it follows the staff in a London emergency room as they treat real people with various problems. (A & E in this context stands for "accident and emergency".) At the end they did a follow-up to show how the people were doing several months after their segments were filmed. As "reality" shows go, it was actually pretty decent.

FRIDAY, JULY 24

STIRLING & OBAN, SCOTLAND

I was up around six this morning and quickly got ready for the day. This morning I was greeted in the lobby by some old men who were socializing over breakfast. They cheerfully greeted me with a hearty "Welcome to our lounge!" I acknowledged the greeting, but not much more. This time I added a banana to my pastries and was quickly out the door and on my way to the station.

I misread the upcoming trains sign, and because of that I went to the wrong platform. I was glad I'd budgeted plenty of time, because there was a twenty-minute wait until the next train. I ended up taking a train that left Stirling at 7:20 and got into Glasgow Queen Street right at 8am.

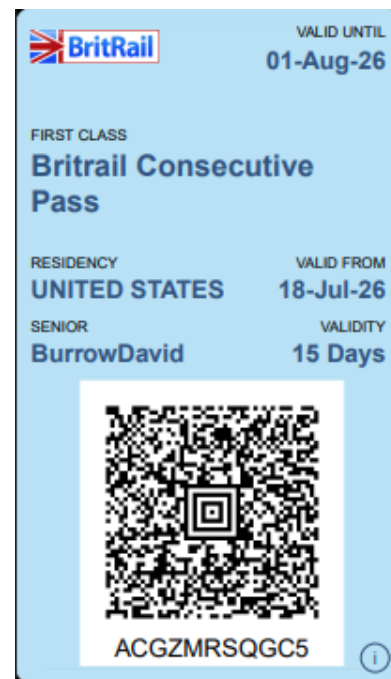
So far my BritRail pass had worked pretty well. There were only a couple of issues with the automatic gates in Newcastle. Today I got through the station gate fine, but when it was time to show the pass to the conductor, it wouldn't come up on my phone. I told the conductor I'd need more time to retrieve it, but even when she came back it wouldn't come up. I offered to pay cash for the ride (which would have been £10.70), but the conductor just waved me off and said it was all right. It wasn't until I got to Glasgow that I managed to get things to work.

In retrospect, I'm pretty sure there were two different problems that came together at the same time. First, the phone was in the process of updating its operating system. The pass initially disappeared from my phone because it was installing the new system. When I restarted the phone, that was no longer a problem. The other issue was with Yahoo Mail, which I like on my computer but hate on my phone. The pass was sent as a .pdf attachment to an e-mail, but for some reason Yahoo said it was unable to scan the .pdf and therefore wouldn't open it. I ended up forwarding the e-mail to my school account (which runs through Google), and it worked fine there. At least for now the pass is permanently in its own window on my phone; hopefully it will stay that way for the rest of the trip.

It was important that I get to Glasgow Queen Street promptly, because I needed to immediately transfer to a train that would leave at 8:22am. That train only leaves three times a day. There was one in the five o'clock hour, but nothing would connect from Stirling to transfer to it, and the next train wasn't until noon. While the urban part of Scotland gets frequent service, that's not the case out in the boonies. Nevertheless, it's still more frequent than most of what Amtrak runs.

I was glad I'd downloaded the ScotRail app on my phone, because that told me that I'd need to go to Platform 7 to catch my train. The signs in the station said "please wait" in the platform column, and they didn't reveal that information until about five minutes before the departure time. The app was correct, and it was nice to avoid the last-minute rush.

The train was about two-thirds full, though I lucked out in not having a seatmate. Making it fuller was the fact that most people on board had a ton of luggage with them. I was just making a day trip, so I had the same Aldi bag I've been carrying everywhere in Britain. The crowd made me thankful that I'd made seat reservations beforehand. There were reservation tags on almost every occupied seat, and it was nice to have a forward-facing seat for what would be one of my longest train rides of the trip.



This is actually two trains in one. It runs on what they call the West Highlands Line, and halfway through the train splits to go to two different destinations. That's the same thing that happens with Amtrak's Lake Shore Limited and Empire Builder, but on a bit smaller of a scale here. On our train four cars were going to Fort William and Mallaig and four others (including mine) were headed to Oban (which I'd find is pronounced "OH-bin" in Scotland, unlike the same-named place in New Zealand, where it's "OH-bahn").

The highlands in Scotland are true mountains. Geologically they're the same range as the Appalachians, and much of the scenery looked like western Pennsylvania or upstate New York. It also looked a lot like New Zealand, with every shade of green you could imagine and ferns growing everywhere. It really is spectacularly beautiful, certainly the nicest landscape I'd seen so far on the trip.

While it's popular with tourists (particularly backpackers), by British standards this is a very remote train line. Most of it has just one track, and the trains in different directions are scheduled so they pass each other at a station. The clearing for the tracks is also very narrow, to the point that many times trees scraped both sides of the train.

It was a chilly day. The temperature had gotten down to 14 degrees Celsius (57 Fahrenheit) overnight in Stirling, and they were expecting a high of just 15 in Oban. That's apparently quite typical for summer weather in Scotland. Someone later in the day would note "we don't really have winter or summer here, but we do have twelve months of fall." I'd worn a light jacket, but really something heavier would have been nice, particularly since many of the windows on the train were open.

While the highlands are relatively low, they are serious mountains. Some of it is used as grazing land, but the majority is forested. What surprised me most was that there was a definite tree line, which I suppose comes from a combination of latitude (about the same as Juneau) and elevation. Whatever the reason, most of the higher mountains are treeless at the top.

Much of our route ran next to the long, narrow lakes that in Scotland are called "lochs" (with a harsh sound like the Spanish "j" at the end). The most famous lake we passed was Loch Lomond (and we were definitely on the proverbial high road by there). We also passed Gare Loch and Loch Arrochar, not to mention countless swift-flowing streams full of rocks. Much of the land we went through was protected as national parks. There are trails throughout the area, and backpackers got on and off the train at nearly every stop.

While it's less than a hundred miles from Glasgow to Oban, the train trip takes over three hours. The train sped along through the Glasgow suburbs and the farmland north of there. Once we reached the mountains, though, I saw signs that the speed limit was just 20 miles per hour, and I don't think I'd have wanted the train to have gone faster than that. The train did go pretty steadily at that speed through the mountains. The speed limit on the parallel road seems to vary a lot. Sometimes it's "national limit" (which all over Britain is 60mph), but there are frequent curves that get the speed down to 10mph.



The bonnie, bonnie banks of Loch Lomond

There are about a dozen stops along the way, but most are quite short. Even splitting the train went quickly. Something that did stand out was that the train had an unusual horn (a low beep, followed by a high-pitched beep) that sounded each time we approached a station. That was about the only time the horn sounded, though, since there were almost no level crossings along the way.

To break the trip up a bit, I bought coffee and a Kit-Kat bar from the snack trolley. Otherwise I just looked out at the scenery and made a few notes in Google Keep to help write this recap.

We got to Oban about 11:30. The town is the primary gateway to the Hebrides islands, and the train station is conveniently located right next to the port to allow passengers to transfer easily to ferries. I quickly went through a little gift shop by the station where I got some postcards and some traditional Scottish candy. Then I found a place to have lunch. I ended up having a Wiltshire ham and mature cheddar toastie, a dish of apple slices, and a Sprite Zero. The vast majority of pop sold in the U.K. is diet. There also appears to be a sugar tax, because "real" pop is invariably more expensive than diet.

I paid at both the gift shop and the restaurant with coins. In countries like Britain that have high-value coins, you rapidly accumulate a lot of change. The little bag I kept change in already had more than £20 worth of coins in it. At home I save almost all my change (in fact that's how I fund a lot of my travels), but on vacation I have to spend as much as possible.

Something that stood out in Oban was that there were dogs everywhere. Pretty much all the townspeople seemed to have dogs with them, and a lot of people brought dogs on the train. Most were well behaved, but there were a few that really should have more training on how to act in public.

Aside from the train trip and seeing the town, the main thing I'd planned today was taking a tour of a whisky distillery (and, by the way, the beverage is always spelled without an "e" in Scotland). I had a vague idea where the distillery was in relation to the train station, but I figured I'd use Google Maps to pinpoint it. Even though I supposedly had strong cell service, for some reason Google Maps wouldn't find a route at all. Fortunately my instinct was right, and while it was further than I thought it would be, I did eventually find the place.

The tour I took was led by a guy named Mike who works as an official taster for the Oban Distillery. While they're a fairly small distillery, they're apparently quite well known for producing top-grade whisky. (I found out before the trip that my brother John had enjoyed their product.) Mike led us to four locations that explained the basic process in making whisky. Essentially you first make beer and then distill it both to fortify the alcohol content and to remove impurities. At that point the product is a flavorless, extremely high-proof spirit (much like Everclear). It's then put in oak barrels and aged, typically for fourteen years. Some of their whisky is aged a second time in barrels imported from Spain that were formerly used to make sherry. The main aging barrels also used to come from Spain, but they switched to American oak back in the '30s during the Spanish Civil War. They actually buy used barrels that had been used to make Jim Beam bourbon in Kentucky. After aging the whisky is bottled and sold.



14-year old barrels at Oban Distillery

Most of the others on this tour were people from the Twin Cities who were taking a shore excursion from a cruise. When we were asked to introduce ourselves, they were surprised that someone from Iowa was there. Three other women were from Luxembourg. That stood out because there are a lot of people at Garrigan whose ancestors came from that country. The guide kept asking the Luxembourgers how to say various things in their language. He obviously spoke German and recognized most of the words. He said "It's like the Swiss, who speak German but just throw in some French here and there."

During the tour we were offered samples of three types of whisky. The first was their standard product, the second was the kind aged in sherry barrels, and the third was a special grade chosen by their tasting crew. I'm not at all a whisky fan, but I did enjoy the first and third, both of which were sweeter and more flavorful than I expected. The second was not for me. I can remember discretely dumping whiskey into a potted plant when I was in college, and this tasted like that stuff.

Instead of buying overpriced alcohol (with prices up to £100 a bottle), I bought an Oban shirt in the distillery gift shop. I also bought a bag of caramel corn where the coating had been made with whisky.

I stopped at a convenience store (Day-Today) after visiting the distillery. I bought some drinks (pop and apple juice) and a couple candy bars there. I somehow got confused leaving the convenience store, and I found myself nowhere near the station. Again Google Maps was useless, so I ended up asking a guy from the Rotary who was soliciting donations in a supermarket parking lot. It turned out I'd overshot the station by about half a mile, but I did manage to get back there in time for my train. In fact I'd just sat down in the waiting room when they called the train for boarding.

The train followed the same route back to Glasgow, though it did look a bit different heading the opposite direction. I spent much of the time e-mailing the photos I'd taken so I could work with them on the computer back at the hotel.

I wasn't feeling the best on the trip back. Perhaps that was three glasses of whisky, but I think the diesel fumes from the train had more to do with it. It helped to drink the Sprite Zero I'd bought, and as I write this in the evening, I feel fine.



Boarding the West Highland train in Oban

When We got to Glasgow again the station signs weren't showing platforms. I checked the ScotRail app and was pleased to find it showed we'd leave from Platform 2. In fact, the train I was taking was the same one I'd come in on from Oban.

My dinner tonight was just the snacks I'd bought, so hardly a diabetic-friendly meal. The whisky popcorn was quite good, as were "treacle toffee lollies" (basically little round caramels made of almost burnt syrup). I got the travelogue caught up and then packed up my stuff, since tomorrow I'd be moving on again.

Shortly before heading to bed I checked the trains I was scheduled to take tomorrow and I found the primary one had been cancelled, supposedly due to a shortage of crew. I spent a while looking into various options and then re-set my alarm for about half an hour later than I originally planned.

SATURDAY, **J**ULY 25

STIRLING, SCOTLAND TO PRESTON & BLACKPOOL, ENGLAND

I was up about 6:15 this morning—before the alarm went off, but only slightly. I showered and got my stuff ready and this time picked up some cereal (nut and honey corn flakes) and a banana for my breakfast. The walk to the station was almost eerily empty, as no one at all was out at 7:00 on a Saturday. It was sprinkling a bit, but nothing particularly annoying.

The station elevators worked fine, and this time I made careful note of which platform I needed (#9). I got there nearly fifteen minutes before my train would depart. My phone worked correctly for displaying the pass, and the trip down to Glasgow Queen Street was uneventful.

Glasgow has two major train stations. Trains to and from the north generally use Queen Street, while those headed southward go to Glasgow Central Station. I had to switch from one to the other, which is about a fifteen-minute walk. (Theoretically I could have done the final leg of the subway to get there, but those miniature cars would be especially challenging with luggage.) I was glad that I'd walked through downtown Glasgow the other day, because there is no signage between the stations at all. (Signage all over Britain is generally abysmal; it annoys me that most of the time they don't even sign street names.) The route I picked did indeed lead me straight there. When I got to Centra Station there were big signs advertising a free bus to Queen Street, something they don't mention in reverse.

Central Station was all decked out for the Commonwealth Games and had huge signs welcoming visitors in many languages. That's just about the only place in Britain I saw languages other than English. It would honestly be pretty tough for someone who didn't speak English to visit the United Kingdom—really harder than visiting the U.S.A. It's certainly convenient that English has become the second language for basically everyone in Europe.

While the platform number said "wait", the Real Time Trans app told me the train I wanted would be at Platform 1. Confirming that was that the only Trans-Pennine Express train in the station was already at that platform. Every other train there was from ScotRail. When I went to the platform, the only person on the train was a guy in the first class car who appeared to be asleep. Before long two police officers went aboard the train and escorted the man to the platform. Not long after he left they started boarding the train.

Mine was the 9:07 service to Manchester. I was very glad that I had a first-class rail pass on this train, because lots of other passengers from the cancelled train had ended up on this one. Some of the coach cars were standing room only, which isn't good on a trip of nearly three hours.

My phone acted up again when it was time for the tickets to be scanned. Somehow it ended up in landscape mode, which made the QR code too small for the scanner. The conductor was able to clarify that I had a first class pass from the text, and he went on to other passengers. I googled how to get the phone back to normal, and later in the trip another conductor scanned the pass with no problem.

On longer trips Trans-Pennine serves meals just like LNER does. It would have been interesting to be there later in the day, because they had a special dinner service for the Commonwealth games featuring dishes from all over the world (Australian meat pies, Indian curries, Jamaican jerk chicken, and an African rice dish). Breakfast was their standard menu, but I chose an item they didn't have on LNER—a waffle. While it was small (about a quarter of those ones you can make at hotels), it was truly delicious. Instead of syrup, they topped it with a fresh berry compote. I doubt I'll be travelling on Trans-Pennine again, but if I do, I'd definitely order that waffle again. I also got orange juice, biscuits (i.e., cookies), crisps (i.e., chips), and a cup of coffee. The coffee was interesting, because it was served in an all-paper cup. Even the lid was paper. Britain is trying to discourage single-use plastics, and I suppose this was part of that. A paper lid just doesn't work well for coffee, though. It basically disintegrated before I'd finished the cup.

I spent some of the trip reading through news articles on my phone. This meant I had to navigate the annoying world of British websites and phone apps. Everything that is accessible in the European Union (which most U.K. sites are) is required to display an option to opt out of cookies as soon as the site is loaded. Most sites also love to use pop-ups, either from sponsors or more often from the site itself. That makes it take twice as long to get the information you want.



Sheep grazing near Lockerbie

how different English and Scottish architecture are. Suddenly almost everything was brick again, with a few half-timbered buildings from centuries ago. The stone and stucco of Scotland were gone.

A new conductor boarded at Carlisle. She scanned my pass, and she also kicked out multiple people with second-class tickets who were trying to sit in first. One old lady she kicked out had already ordered breakfast when the conductor came through. Of course, the people she told to move all said they didn't realize their mistake. The cars look completely different, though, and there's a big sign that says "first class" by the door.

Our route took us through the area of northwest England called the lake district. I didn't see any lakes at all, but I did see an area that looked very pastoral, with neat fields separated by stone walls or sometimes stones held together in steel frames. It's very rural, which made it stand out all the more that the lake district was criss-crossed by several major motorways. There's also little towns everywhere, making it clear that rural England is much more populated than the Scottish equivalent.

We past through Lancaster, which surprised me in being pronounced with three equally stressed syllables, rather like the same-named Los Angeles suburb. The "r" at the end is dropped, but that's true in almost every word in British English. My mother and sister always said it as "LANG-cus-tur" with the stress on the first syllable, basically the same way they do in Pennsylvania. Neither the recorded announcement nor the conductor said it that way, though.

The next stop south of Lancaster was my stop, Preston. Preston is the county town of Lancashire (equivalent to a state capital), even though the county itself is named after Lancaster. We arrived about five minutes late, and I quickly made my way off the train.

Preston station is another place that's not well signed at all. Ramps from the platforms lead down to an underground passage. There were signs there saying "way out to city centre" (which I assumed was what I wanted) and "way out to car park". I turned in the direction of "city centre", but beyond there the only signs they had were for the car park and various platforms. Other passengers (most of whom were British) were equally confused. I ended up asking a janitor, and she explained that I needed to take the lift up to Platform 4 and then go forward to the end of the platform. There was no signage at all explaining that, but I'm glad her directions were accurate.

I also got turned around leaving the station, though this time Google Maps actually worked and got me on the right path. Once I got headed the right way, my hotel (another Premier Inn) was only about a five minute walk from the station, just off Preston's high street (called Fishergate here).

Reception for this Premier Inn was up a level from the street, and no one was there when I showed up. They had a button, which I pressed. It didn't make any sound I could hear, but before long a guy named Matt showed up and checked me in. This is a brand new hotel, and the room I'm in is nicer than the others I've had at Premier Inn. It's apparently designed for families and features a double bed, a single bed, and a trundle under the double. There would be almost no space at all if you puled out the trundle, but it would be a cheap way for a family to stay the night.

Pretty much nothing this afternoon or evening went to plan. That was first because the cancelled train meant I got to Lancashire an hour later than planned. Secondly the weather alternated between dripping and pouring. Since it was less than inviting out, I spent quite a bit of time at the hotel. I got caught up on this rambling summary and just relaxed a bit. It was after 2pm when I finally set out.

I'd originally planned to skip lunch and have a more formal dinner later on. I was hungry, though, so I ended up having a late lunch at a place called Chopstix. This is a British fast food chain that is Asian in the same way that Taco Bell is Mexican. The entirely white staff wasn't cooking up any Chinese delicacies, but the food wasn't bad. I got a combo box that included a lo mein and fried rice base topped with spoonfuls of three different varieties of chicken stir fries. The meal also came with the most flavorless egg rolls I've

The first part of today's route took us through southwest Scotland. The land here is hilly rather than mountainous, and it's basically all farmland. There were sheep everywhere, and a lot of fields as well. I know from the whisky tour that by far the most common crop in Scotland is barley, so that's probably what they were growing here.

Before long we reached Lockerbie, our southernmost stop in Scotland. You may remember Lockerbie as the site of a terrorist attack back in the '80s when a Pam Am plane exploded, killing everyone on the plane and several people in the town. Lockerbie looked like a very pleasant town, and it's unfortunate that their main place in historic was so tragic.

Between Lockerbie and Carlisle we crossed back into England. It's amazing just

ever had, plus a Diet Pepsi. It amazed me how busy the place was in the middle of the afternoon, but everyone in Preston seemed to be there.

From the restaurant I walked over to the station and was glad I now knew how to get to the different platforms efficiently. I got to platform 2 just in time to catch the 15:01 train to Blackpool North. (Schedules in Britain always use the 24-hour clock, though in conversation people would call this 3:01pm.) The train was crowded with people who had already been drinking to prepare for Saturday night on the town. They were loud and obnoxious, and I was glad it was just a twenty-minute trip.

Two things stood out as I rode over to Blackpool. One was the woman seated at the table in front of me who spent the entire ride doing her make-up. It was caked on thick enough that it could have been theatrical make-up; indeed, I wondered if she might not be either a transvestite or a prostitute (or perhaps both). The other interesting thing was an enormous field that was filled with solar panels. I doubt they were doing much on this dreary day.

As I got off the train I saw three fascinating young men. They were obviously drunk, and they were all dressed in cartoon costumes. I don't know if there was some convention going on or if they were headed to a costume party, but it certainly made for an interesting sight.



Gynn Square – Blackpool

I bought a day pass for the Blackpool trams and buses. I was pleased there was a tram stop right next to the train station, and I caught a tram almost immediately. I rode a few blocks over to the beach and then up the coast to a stop called Gynn Square. This is a beautiful overlook that was built in honor of fallen police officers (constabulary) of Lancashire.

The overlook provided gorgeous views of the beach and the Irish Sea, but I definitely didn't dawdle there. In the words of the Scots, it was "blowing a hoolie". That is to say the wind was extremely fierce, to the point that it was difficult to keep my baseball cap on. Even in bad weather, it is a beautiful view, though.

I caught a second tram down to the Blackpool Tower, a structure modeled on the Eiffel Tower that dominates the skyline along the coast. I'd thought about going to the top, but I didn't think this was a good day to do that. In clear weather you can see the Isle of Man from Blackpool Tower (about 175 miles away), but I'd have been lucky to see a couple miles out to sea today.

I hiked in the mist from the tower to Blackpool's central pier. This area is a lot like Coney Island, with various aging amusements that continue to attract people who want to have fun at the beach. I was amazed at how many people were at the Blackpool pier in spite of the weather. It was a weird combination of young families and elderly people, but everyone seemed to be having fun.

The one thing I was planning to do at the pier was to take a ride on the Great Wheel. This is the third giant Ferris wheel on this location, a tradition dating back more than a hundred years. Unfortunately, while the wheel was turning, they weren't taking passengers because of the wind. That's understandable, but it was disappointing.

Another thing I'd planned to do was going to Saturday night mass. I'd found a church (St. John Vianney, who I know is the patron of priests) that had a five o'clock mass, and I found directions on how to get there by bus. I boarded bus #2 in good time to make it to the church by the time mass started, but even though I pressed the "stop" button with plenty of notice, the driver completely skipped the stop near the church. The next stop was past a freeway interchange, about half a mile away. I attempted to walk back, and had I just followed my common sense, I would have made it right as mass was starting. I instead followed a shortcut Google Maps gave me, and it led me to a dead end in a place the map said went through. My leg was aching badly, and back-tracking would I'd arrive well after the service began. I saw that there was a bus stop for another line nearby, so I went there and just caught a bus downtown.



Central Pier – Blackpool

The rain started up again, and I thought about just riding the tram around for a while to kill time until the evening event I'd planned. It turned out that it was a long walk to the tram line, though, and I could barely limp there on my bum knee. I stopped twice and rested on benches and in the process got thoroughly soaked. Meanwhile the surrounding area got rowdier and rowdier. It reminded me

of Bourbon Street in New Orleans but probably even rougher. The general feeling of the place made me decide to change my evening plans.

I'd bought a ticket to see a play (Dolly Parton's *9 to 5*) at the Blackpool Grand Theatre. What I probably should have done was to go to a matinee, which they did have earlier today. I could have seen the coast afterwards. My ticket was for a show starting at 7:30, and they said the final curtain would be around 10:30pm. As rollicking as downtown Blackpool was in the five o'clock hour, I really didn't want to see it late at night on a Saturday. I'd be out £20 for skipping the show. It was money I paid months ago, though, and I was looking forward to just relaxing.

I made a brief stop at a Sainsbury's (pronounced with two syllables SANES-breeze) hypermarket (the equivalent of a Super Target) where I mostly picked up a tub of grapes that would be my dinner tonight. Then I made my way back to Blackpool North station. The fact that the station was full of security at 6pm made me feel good about my decision not to go there after dark. There was a long line of mostly drunk people waiting for the 6:22 train to Manchester, which would stop at Preston (and about a dozen other places) on its way.

The train's departure was delayed, supposedly because a member of the train crew was arriving on a train coming in from York on a different platform. The delay allowed even more drunk people to board, and the train was crowded with standees when we finally set off at 6:34pm. Fortunately I was one of the first to board, and between sitting down and taking some ibuprofen, my knee felt better by the time we got to Preston.

The most memorable thing on this ride was that it seemed like all of the other passengers were vaping on the train. There are signs that clearly say that smoking in any form is prohibited, but no one appeared to be enforcing that rule. My clothes reeked by the time I got back to Preston; I might as well have been in a bar.

I spent much of the evening watching the British version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. It intrigued me that one of the questions was about rock star David Bowie. In America we pronounce the first syllable of his name to rhyme with "foe", but the British host made it rhyme with "cow". I wonder how the singer himself said it.

I watched a bit more Tv and got caught up on this journal. That was pretty much it for the day—not as exciting as planned, but it was good to rest up my legs.

SUNDAY, JULY 26

PRESTON TO LIVERPOOL, ENGLAND

I was up at 6:45 this morning. While later than most days on this trip, that was still half an hour before the time my alarm was set for. This hotel, like the one in Doncaster, had a combination bathtub and shower, and the tub had enormously high sides. It was quite a chore to step over it just to take a shower, and I think it would have been all but impossible to actually take a bath in it.

I gathered my bags and stopped by reception to leave my key. No one was there, but they did have a container to place keys. I'd later get a message on my phone asking if I'd checked out.

While my leg certainly felt better than it did last night, I still was very slow making my way back to the station. The Premier Inn is at the bottom of a hill, and the sidewalk leading to it is not handicap-accessible. That meant it was quite a task to get haul my luggage.

Downtown Preston was absolutely dead on Sunday morning. There was absolutely no one out, and the only business open was a Tesco Express convenience store. I wasn't sure if I'd get food on the train or not, so I figured I'd stop at the McDonalds downtown. Unfortunately in downtown Preston McDonalds doesn't open until 9am on Sunday.

I got to the station about half an hour before my train was due to leave. For fun as much as anything I picked up the seat reservation ticket for this train from a vending machine. If you make them in advance, seat reservations are marked on the trains with either a red light by the seat or a computer-printed tag. The conductors never check for the actual tickets. The paper version was free, though, and it gives me a little souvenir.

I made my way to Platform 2, where I had a long, boring wait. The train was already on that platform (apparently it originated in Preston), but it was locked. There was seating for exactly five on the entire platform, and I was about the seventh person there. I paced, and I just stood. For a short time I tried to sit on steps that led to a walkway to another platform. There were enough people using those steps that I'd be in the way, though, so I moved on.

A train to Blackpool came and went on the neighboring platform while I waited. There were certainly fewer people headed to Blackpool than there had been yesterday. The cars were practically empty. I assume those who had been there last night were still sleeping things off.

A driver finally boarded the train five minutes before our scheduled departure. Then with just two minutes to go they unlocked the doors so people could board. They must know what they're doing, because we left right on time at 8:54am.

I was the only passenger in the first class car on this train, and I suspect the other cars were similarly sparse. I mostly just looked out the window, not that there was much to see. Most of the ride was through scrubby forest, with occasional industrial areas thrown in. The northwest is an industrial powerhouse, but it's not the beauty spot of England.

My destination today was Liverpool. It was amusing to hear the recorded voice on the train repeatedly say the name of the city. It came out more like LAV-uh-pole.

We got to Liverpool Lime Street station about five minutes early, around 9:40am. While I'd booked early check-in at my hotel today, that wouldn't be available until 11:00. I filled some of that time going to the train station location of Weatherspoon's, Britain's largest chain of pubs. Each Weatherspoon's has its own name (this one was "the Northwestern") and supposedly a unique décor (this looked like furnishings from a thrift shop over a carpet salvaged from Grandma's). They all serve the same food and drinks, though. This morning most people were having breakfast (myself included), but a surprising number were drinking beer, wine, and hard cider at ten o'clock on a Sunday morning.

I ordered through my phone at Weatherspoon's. I had a bacon butty, a sandwich that consists of nothing but bacon on white bread. It would have been better had the bread been toasted, but that wasn't an option. I also got a bowl of apples and berries topped with a dollop of yogurt, two hash brown triangles, and unlimited coffee from their electronic machine. The whole thing was about ten pounds, which didn't seem like too bad of a deal. Their app said that the wait time for food was 6 minutes, and that's about what my breakfast took. I killed about half an hour nursing the food and drink.

I spent the rest of the time until eleven sitting in the main waiting room working on this journal. While I was waiting I thought I heard a buzzing sound over the hullabaloo of the station. It turned out that my new shaver had gotten turned on by pressure from other things in my bag. It was almost fully discharged by the time I realized it.

Next I made my way over to the Premier Inn—Liverpool Lime Street. It's literally across the street from the station, and while it's buried behind a college residence hall (part of the university that Brian May of the rock group Queen was made chancellor of after earning his doctorate in astrophysics), it was easy enough to find.

For some reason Liverpool was the cheapest of the places I could book a Premier Inn. For less money than I paid in Doncaster (which was also cheap) I was able to get one of their "premier plus" rooms. This is slightly larger than the standard room, though about the same size as the family room with multiple beds I had in Preston. It comes with a pod coffee machine in addition to the standard British kettle, and it also has a refrigerator with complimentary bottled water (from a company that's been in business since 1571). There's also an iron and hair dryer, plus a unique artwork on the wall with information about the artist, Carl Saxon. Check-in was easy, and I confirmed with the desk that it would be all right to leave my bags after checking out tomorrow.

One other difference in the "plus" room is the toilet paper. They have the actual rolls of toilet paper I'd expect in a hotel. The regular Premier Inn rooms have dispensers that give out one individual sheet at a time. I remember having those in the bathrooms when I was in elementary school. They seem to be quite popular in the U.K. In addition to Premier Inn, I've seen them in a number of public toilets.

I took about half an hour to get settled at the hotel and set out again shortly before noon. I ended up walking quite a bit further than I'd expected to my first destination, partly again due to confusion with Google Maps. I really wish they'd use the same interface on phones that they do on computers. On my computer I can see all the specific businesses, which makes it easy to know where to turn. On the phone they only have street names, and since Britain often doesn't show street names, that can be hard to figure out. At any rate I walked over a mile for what was supposed to be less than a half-mile walk.

A lot of central Liverpool is pedestrianized. While that can make it difficult to tell exactly where the streets are, it does make walking easier. It's interesting that what isn't pedestrianized often has the widest streets I've seen in Britain. Large parts of Liverpool were destroyed in World War II, and for the most of it was rebuilt with cars in mind.

It had rained while I was in the hotel, and the pavement was still quite wet. I made a point to be very careful walking, since I certainly didn't want to injure myself any more. Looking down to watch my steps, something that caught my eye was that Liverpool still has social distancing stickers on their sidewalks. I'd think in six years those would have worn away, but several times I saw stickers advising me to keep 2 meters from other people.

My destination was the Beatles Museum, which I'd bought admission to ahead of time. This is a privately run museum that mostly includes memorabilia donated by Pete Best (the Beatles' original drummer) and the estate of Brian Epstein (their manager). Surprisingly little of the stuff deals with those two in particular, but it does tend to focus on the early part of the group's career. It is located in the building that housed the former Casbah Coffee Club, one of the first venues where the Beatles performed. It's also right down the street from the much more famous Cavern Club, which is still in business.



LEFT: John Lennon's school desk
RIGHT: Sergeant Pepper costumes



While the Beatles Museum is crowded and not well organized, I did find a few interesting things. I was particularly intrigued by a desk John Lennon used in school and by the original costumes used for Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. I also enjoyed seeing a wristwatch that John Lennon threw away after it stopped working at a club in Hamburg. The museum also features tons of musical instruments, various letters (like one written to the Adelaide police thanking them for protecting the group from overly aggressive fans), and many microphones and recording equipment.



Statue of Queen Victoria – Liverpool

was a slave market on the docks at one point and the city profited greatly off of all aspects of the triangle trade.

After the Beatles Museum I had another long walk (though at least this time the route was straightforward) to the Liverpool docks. My next destination was an urban renewal project in that area, the Liverpool Museum. This is an enormous institution that covers just about every aspect of the city imaginable. An entire floor is devoted to the history of the docks themselves. Liverpool is Britain's largest port, and for centuries the docks were its largest employer. That changed abruptly with the switch to containerized shipping. While Liverpool is a container port, it takes only a handful of men to do the work thousands used to do. They argue that this has been a positive change overall, since the city has mostly transitioned successfully to white-collar employment. However another exhibit explores what it's like to be homeless in Liverpool, which made me recall that I had seen a fairly large number of people on the street earlier in the day.

Another big aspect of Liverpool's history is slavery, which is tied to its importance as a port. While few slaves ended up in Liverpool itself, there



John Lennon & Yoko Ono's bed
Liverpool Museum

They trace the history of Liverpool going back to around the time of Christ. Liverpool was a point of conflict between the Celts, the Anglo-Saxons, and the Vikings. (Something I'd not realized before is that the word "Viking" comes from the Nordic root meaning "harbor"; I should have realized that in Iceland, where every town ends in "vik".) The Mersey region is one of the few places with significant roots in all three of those groups. They continue the history through the industrial revolution, the world wars, and on into the computer age.

Finally there's an entire floor devoted to Liverpool and the arts. A significant part of this is devoted to the Beatles, and honestly the city museum did better editing than the official Beatles museum. A lot of other pop musicians have come out of Liverpool, too (the one I knew best was Frankie Goes to Hollywood), and the city was also home to many classical musicians. Poetry is apparently also big in Liverpool, and it's been very important in the British fashion scene. Finally, the place has been used for filming countless movies and TV shows. In those appearances different parts of Liverpool and its suburbs have doubled for London, Rome, Paris, Moscow, New York, Washington, and Cleveland.

I had noticed walking around that Liverpool was a very diverse city, and they addressed this in the museum as well. There are a higher percentage of immigrants in Liverpool than in any British

city other than London. Historically the largest immigrant group was Irish, but today people from south Asia and the Caribbean dominate. There are also many immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, particularly Poland, Greece, and Turkey. Liverpool is also a place many younger British people move to, largely because of its tech-oriented businesses. They particularly attract people from Wales, Scotland, and the rest of northern England.

The Liverpool Museum was one of my favorites among the places I've gone on this trip, and Liverpool as a whole is probably my favorite place I've been so far. It's a really nice city.

From the museum I walked up to James Street station, which is on Merseyrail. This is mostly a commuter rail line, though it makes a loop in the subway beneath four main downtown stations. Unlike the transit systems in Newcastle and Glasgow, Merseyrail is covered by the BritRail pass. Their faregates didn't recognize the QR code, though, so I had to find a guard to let me in by hand.

I rode west from downtown into the Wirral. This is a peninsula that forms Liverpool harbor and is mostly home to prosperous suburbs. My destination was Port Sunlight, a model town that was founded in the 1880s by the Lever Brothers to be a place their workers would want to live. The "Sunlight" in the name was actually a brand of detergent that Lever manufactured in the town.

Port Sunlight is a lovely little town. Its row houses have false fronts that are decorated to make them look like old Tudor-style homes, and the front yards (called "gardens here") are larger than what you see on most "terrace estates". There's also lovely public buildings and nice parks (including one where I paused for a few minutes to watch some old men playing lawn bowling. It really is a charming place, and it was interesting to ponder an age where there actually were benevolent industrialists.

While Lever does still have a factory there, Port Sunlight is no longer a company town. The homes are all privately owned, and it appears I passed an agent who had some listed for about half a million pounds. That made me recall that the museum noted that a lack of affordable housing was the biggest cause for homelessness in Merseyside.



Port Sunlight, Merseyside

I took Merseyrail back to Lime Street station and spent some time resting up at the hotel. Then I caught the bus for one more bit of exploration. It was interesting that on the news yesterday the new prime minister noted that he planned to freeze bus fares across the country at £2 per ride, and that was indeed the price of Arriva buses in Merseyside. I used eight 50p coins for my round-trip.

After a long, long wait near Lime Street station I caught bus #75 eastward and got a nice tour of residential Liverpool. My ultimate destination was the setting of one of the Beatles' most famous songs, Penny Lane. This is the name of both a street and a larger neighborhood, as well as a number of businesses that appear to be attempting to profit from the song.



Sign and houses on Penny Lane – Liverpool

While I wouldn't describe the area as "blue suburban skies" (it's very much part of the city), it is a pleasant neighborhood. The roundabout that the song refers to has been bypassed by the main highway and now holds a bus stop that bears the name "Sergeant Pepper Interchange". It's painted with a mural illustrating various Beatles songs. Unlike some other places I've been in England, there is no barber anywhere near Penny Lane. I also did not see a banker or a fireman or a nurse selling poppies—though perhaps that was because it was a quiet Sunday afternoon. There is a lovely church on the corner (St. Barnabas, also known as the Penny Lane Church) that was holding choral evensong

while I passed by. Mostly, though, the area is residential—very nice row houses that go for about half the price the ones in Port Sunlight sell for.

After making a quick trip around the area I almost immediately caught the inbound bus #75. It went much faster than the outbound bus, probably because the bulk of traffic was heading home after an afternoon of shopping or fun downtown. On the way back we passed Liverpool's Catholic cathedral (Christ the King). That stood out because they had an exhibit about building the cathedral in the museum. In the Victorian era when Liverpool was getting hundreds of thousands of Catholic immigrants from Ireland, there were plans to build a Gothic-style cathedral that would be the largest in England. Costs skyrocketed, and much of what had been completed was destroyed in World War II. (There's actually an Anglican church nearby that was destroyed during the war and now exists only as a shell.) After the war they built a rather unfortunate looking modern building quickly and cheaply. It's apparently much loved by the city and has actually been "grade 1 listed", the equivalent of an American building being on the National Register of Historic Places.



R.C. Cathedral of Christ the King – Liverpool

Sadly we also passed about half a dozen churches (Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist) that had been completely abandoned. What were once lovely buildings are now covered in graffiti with their windows smashed. Like most of Europe, the U.K. is a very secular country, and the religions that are growing there are Islam and Hinduism. It is sad to see a church completely abandoned, though.

Since the bus stop was right by a McDonalds, that's where I went for supper. Again my credit card was declined at the kiosk, but I was able to pay cash at the counter. I was intrigued that the kiosk had a choice to see the menu in English, Welsh, or Polish. I had an item they've been heavily advertising during this trip, a chicken sandwich with hot honey sauce. This time I got fries with the combo, with the same diet apple soda I had before. It made for a nice dinner.

I watched the news while I ate my dinner back at the hotel. The big story was that towns all over France and Spain were being evacuated due to wildfires. As a side feature of that story, they visited an area of Wales where the locals combined their resources to buy a herd of cattle to eat the dry grass that had accumulated on public land during the heatwave. The other main news story was that there had been a terrorist attack at a pride march in Germany. The weather forecast is for hotter temperatures this coming week, though it doesn't sound as bad as it was earlier in the summer in England. Most of the sports revolved around the Commonwealth Games, with the big news being that the island of Jersey won their first ever medal.

I got caught up on this and called it a night. Today had been a much better day than yesterday.

MONDAY, **J**ULY 27

LIVERPOOL TO CHESTER, ENGLAND & FLINT, WALES

While today would have been a perfect day to sleep in late, of course I was wide awake early. The shower in this room leaked all over the bathroom floor, something I don't think was intentional (as it is in some European countries). I did manage to get clean and to wipe down the floor, though.

For a change I had paid to include breakfast at the hotel restaurant with my booking. (Even combining the plus room, early check-in, and breakfast, it was still a very cheap night.) I made my way downstairs, and an attendant checked my name off a list. The Premier Inn breakfast was all right, but I don't know that I'd pay for it again. If I liked traditional English breakfast, it would have been great. They even had cooked tomatoes and blood sausage, which I'm sure made some people's day. From the hot buffet I found the lone fried egg that wasn't runny, a couple of undercooked hash brown triangles, and a couple slices of bacon (which in England is essentially ham). I also had the same croissant and pain au chocolat I'd gotten for free in Stirling, and some yogurt with berries like I had at Weatherspoon's yesterday. It was a big enough breakfast and probably worth the £11 they charged (I paid £9.99 by booking early). It just didn't do a whole lot for me.

One thing that was amusing was that on the TV where many hotels would be playing Fox News (or in the U.K. Sky), they ran a bunch of videos of Beatles songs. That was a nice local touch.

About 8:45 I checked out and left my bags at the desk. I walked over to Lime Street station, and before long I caught a train. Different sources said the train I took was run by either West Midlands Railway or London—Northwest Railway. They appear to be the same company in the process of re-naming. I'm not sure what the correct name is.

I only rode two stops east, and most of the trip was either in a tunnel or a deep open cut. When we were at ground level we mostly passed through rail yards and beside warehouse facilities. I've noted before that trains rarely take you through the nicest parts of cities, and Liverpool is certainly no exception.

My ultimate destination was South Parkway, a major park-and-ride that's also a transfer point for buses that go to John Lennon International Airport. Just as it had on Merseyrail yesterday, my pass generated an error at the scanner here. A guard seemed confused, but after looking at it, he let me through.

I'd come here to join a tour of the Beatles' homes run by the British National Trust. Many companies run tours that take you past the outside of those homes, and you can do it yourself on public transit. This is the only way you can see inside the homes, though. I'd booked the tour in advance (£40), and I was very glad I got a chance to do it.

First there was a wait before the tour would begin, though. We had been told to be at bus stand #2 15 minutes prior to the departure time (so about 9:45), and I'd gotten there with about half an hour to spare. The bus (actually an oversized van like a hotel shuttle might use) showed up just a couple minutes before we were scheduled to leave. Unfortunately, when the driver started checking people off, he found seven were missing. A couple minutes after our scheduled departure time a woman with a strong accent (it turned out she was from France) showed up and said, "My husband and children will be here shortly. He is parking the car." While we were waiting for the husband, a couple from Portugal showed up without even an apology. The other four (the husband and kids) finally arrived about ten minutes after we were scheduled to leave, and they appeared to be in no hurry at all.

The driver pulled out almost immediately, and as we went around the busway, I could see a city bus stopping in the location where he had parked. I'm not sure what would have happened if we'd been there even a minute longer.

Paul McCartney's boyhood home was about a five-minute drive from South Parkway station. Even with a map, though, I don't think I could have made it there on my own. We turned at least seven different times, mostly onto dead-end roads. While the streets are straight, their arrangement is similar to the cul de sacs you might find in an American suburb today. The only through street in the area is South Parkway.

Paul grew up in three different "council estates" around Liverpool. The one we toured was the last of these, a "middle terrace" in a line of rowhouses identical to hundreds of others in a neighborhood that was built immediately after World War II. His parents' motivation for moving there was that it would be the first house they'd live in that had an indoor toilet. It was bought by the National Trust in the 1970s both because McCartney lived there, but also because it is an excellently preserved example of what postwar government housing was like.



in a line of rowhouses identical to hundreds of others in a neighborhood that was built immediately after World War II. His parents' motivation for moving there was that it would be the first house they'd live in that had an indoor toilet. It was bought by the National Trust in the 1970s both because McCartney lived there, but also because it is an excellently preserved example of what postwar government housing was like.

While it is a rowhouse, there is a small pedestrian passage between the McCartney home and its neighbor to the south, which was designed to shield noise and provide a back entrance to both houses. We entered through the back garden, a tiny yard that had a small storage shed where the outhouse would

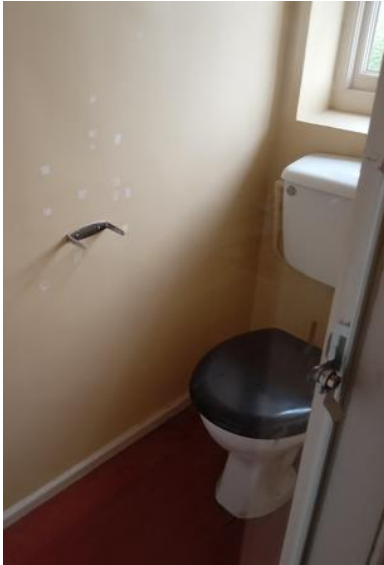
Garden and kitchen from the McCartney home

have been in their previous home. The back entrance leads directly into the kitchen, which was furnished with period appliances and consumer goods. One thing I noticed was a box of Sunlight detergent.

The lower level rooms are all small, and all are connected in a big square shape. There is a "lounge" that had several musical instruments Paul had once played (including drums and a trumpet). That room also held a radio, a "portable" television (that probably weighed fifty pounds or more), and a telephone. The McCartneys were the only home on the block with a phone, because Paul's mother (who died of cancer less than a year after they moved to this house) worked as a midwife.

The parlor or main living room had a period sofa and chairs replicated to match photos from the late '50s and early '60s. The guide also pointed out that the walls of that room featured three different designs of wallpaper. They couldn't afford to decorate a whole room at once, so they did one wall at a time, using excess wallpaper being sold off by a dealer. Similarly instead of a full carpet, they sewed together mismatched runner rugs to cover the floor.

The prized possession in the parlor was an upright piano, the piano Paul taught himself to play and used to write many of the Beatles' early songs. It was donated by McCartney himself with the provision that it should be kept in tune and that any guests who wanted to could play it. (Several in the group did, though I passed.) The piano originally belonged to Paul's father, who was an accomplished musician himself. The father loved having music in his house, and he encouraged Paul and his friends to practice there. They put up egg cartons on the walls to provide acoustic insulation and keep from disturbing the neighbors.



McCartney toilet

The other downstairs room was a dining room that was barely large enough to fit a table and four chairs. Upstairs there were three tiny bedrooms (one each for Paul, his father, and his brother), plus a bathroom. The bathroom was particularly important on the tour. Paul particularly liked practicing music there because of its acoustics, and he'd often sit on the toilet while playing the guitar and singing.

Our driver had picked up another group while we were getting the tour of McCartney's home, and he dropped them off and picked us up. Meanwhile two different tour groups unrelated to ours were being led around to see the neighborhood. It was all the guide could do to keep those people out while letting us out and the other official group in.

We next took about a ten-minute drive to John Lennon's childhood home. This is not far from Penny Lane, and is in fact just one building away from Strawberry Fields, the Victorian asylum for which the song was named. Lennon grew up in a rather dysfunctional family. His parents divorced when he was young, and neither of them wanted him. He ended up living with his Aunt Mimi in a "semi" (i.e. duplex) in what the guide described as the posh part of east Liverpool. The house had been built in the 1920s by a doctor, and its most distinctive feature is art deco glass work on the windows. The house was quite a bit nicer than Mimi could afford. She paid the bills by renting out either one or two rooms to college students. Everything about this home was larger than McCartney's. There were more rooms, and each individual room was larger.

Others on the tour noted that Lennon's home had a blue plaque, the sign of a historic site in England. McCartney's didn't, and they wondered why not. The reason is that Paul McCartney is still alive. To get a blue plaque, the honoree must either be dead or 100 years old, and McCartney doesn't meet either of those criteria.

This house remains almost unchanged from when Lennon lived here. He bought his aunt a retirement home in Dorset, and she kept this largely unchanged until she died. Shortly after that Yoko Ono bought it, and she then donated it to the National Trust together with numerous personal items from Lennon's estate. Because almost everything in the house is original, at Yoko Ono's directive, photography is forbidden inside.

There was less music-oriented stuff in Lennon's house than in McCartney's. Apparently Aunt Mimi hated modern music, and the only place she permitted John to practice was on the enclosed front porch. The most interesting things I saw in the house were personal memorabilia, like grade school report cards (almost universally bad) and the tie that was part of his secondary school uniform. The furnishings were far more elegant and included things like a full console television similar to what I remember in my grandparents' house.



John Lennon's childhood home

The question came up of why the tour only included McCartney and Lennon's homes and not George Harrison's and Ringo Starr's. Harrison's home (a rowhouse quite similar to McCartney's) is privately owned and still used as a home. The Starrs lived in an apartment, a "two by two" (two apartments upstairs, and two down) in a very rough neighborhood. The neighborhood has gotten even worse over time, and the building where the apartment is barely standing. (Even most of the private tours don't go there.) Both are "listed" buildings, and should they come up for sale, the National Trust will consider buying and restoring them.

We were dropped off at South Parkway, and I soon caught another London Northwest/West Midlands train back to Lime Street. I reclaimed my luggage and then made my way back to the station. Before long I boarded a Transport for Wales train that would take me south to Chester. While both Liverpool and Chester are in England, they are part of what Wales considers "the borderlands" and are closely tied to that country.

Transport for Wales is owned by the Welsh government, and all their signage and announcements are bilingual. (The company is called Trafnidiaeth Cymru in Welsh.) Almost every word in Welsh is lengthy, and the pronunciation is unique to say the least. The name of the country (Cymru), for instance, is pronounced "KIM-ree". The destination of this train was Llandudno, a seaside resort in northwest Wales. Its pronounced more or less "SHONN-theed-now", with the double-l about halfway between a "c-h" and an "s-h" sound and the "d" a definite "t-h" sound drawing from the ancient "eth" letter that's still used in Nordic languages. A lot more people seem to speak Welsh than Scottish, though I don't think anyone speaks it as their exclusive language.

I was one of the first to board the train, and I was glad of that, since it ended up being quite crowded. I had a seat, and I fairly easily found a place for my bags. A woman who boarded later struggled and struggled to get an extremely heavy suitcase into the storage above the seats.

It was a rather dull forty-five minute ride from Liverpool to Chester. It's developed pretty much the whole way, and we crossed over several massive motorways as we made our way south. We also passed lots and lots of factories and lots of rowhouses.



Queen Hotel – Chester

The hotel I was staying in tonight was directly across the street from Chester station. It was a place called the Queen that was built to house first class rail passengers a century and a half ago. The queen it was named after was Victoria, and she and Prince Albert stayed here multiple times. I had booked a room at their cheapest rate, which put me in their “new” building (built in the 1930s). The room is quite simple, but it's perfectly acceptable.

I got settled in the room and did a bit of laundry (again drying it with the in-room iron). Then I headed back to the station.

I waited on a crowded platform for the next westbound train. That train was already standing room only, and it was absolutely jam-packed after we all boarded. There was a large group of people who were either Mennonite or Orthodox Jewish. They were dressed all in black, with the men in formal hats and the women in caps. Those people had a lot of children with them, and so did numerous other families who were on the train. I don't know when I'd seen more strollers together at once. There was basically nowhere to move in the train, and I just grabbed a pole and was thankful my ride was only about fifteen minutes.

I got off at Flint, the first large town past the Welsh border (though it's actually developed all the way from Chester). The main reason I wanted to come to Flint (Y Fflint in Welsh) is that it's one of several places in the U.K. that I can trace family roots to. You may recall that on an earlier trip I visited Philadelphia and found the home of Thomas Wynne, William Penn's personal physician who my sister had traced as our ancestor. Wynne's family had lived in Flintshire since at least the 11th Century. I thought it would be interesting to see their old stomping grounds.



Guard tower at Flint Castle

Most of Flint is a rather grim town with rowhouses, apartment blocks, and shopping strips from about the 1970s. There is a single tourist attraction there, and that was my destination. I headed north from the train station to Flint Castle. It was a bit weird after seeing all the children on the train to find that the castle grounds were being used for a day camp for area kids. I made it past them, and it was interesting to see the ruins of the castle itself.

Flint Castle was the first English fortress built in Wales. It was erected by King Edward I in the 1270s as part of a campaign to capture Wales. In 1294 it was the site of a revolt led by Madog ap Llywelyn, the last Welshman to have a legitimate claim to be Prince of Wales. Then in 1399 King Richard II and his cousin who would become Henry IV, something recounted by Shakespeare, though I must confess I have never read *Richard II*. The castle was largely abandoned after that and restoration didn't begin until the 20th Century. Today, while it is ruins, everything is stabilized, and

visitors are welcome to walk up to the top of the towers and look out over the Dee River estuary.

I just missed an eastbound train when I got back to the station, and I had nearly a half-hour wait until the next one. Several other passengers were confused that this train's ultimate destination was Cardiff, since most trains in this area go to either Liverpool or Birmingham. This one basically makes an “L” at Chester and turns south to run along the English/Welsh border. To me (and most of the other passengers, for that matter) its final destination didn't really matter. What did matter was that it would stop at Chester.

We had a lovely view of Chester's old city walls on our approach to the city. Unfortunately I didn't get my phone out until it was too late to get a decent picture of them. By then what was at the side of the train was a horse racing track.

Chester station is about a mile north of downtown, and after we got there I walked down City Road to get to the main business district. In lieu of dinner I had dessert. I went to a place I'd read about called the Little Dessert Shop that does over-the-top sweet treats. I got one of their viral sensations, the kunafa chocolate strawberry pot. It has layers of strawberries, brownies, pistachios, Nutella, and shredded phyllo dough (which is what kunafa is). It has about half of the calories a standard person should have in a day, which is why I didn't have anything else for dinner (and I'd skipped lunch as well). It was really too sweet for my taste, but it was fun to try.

Back at the hotel I did some more laundry and got caught up on the travelogue. I also watched a couple of quiz shows and more of *24 Hours in A & E* on TV. While I was watching TV I got a fascinating e-mail. Right before leaving on this trip, I registered to enter the lottery for buying tickets to the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles. The e-mail told me I was accepted and had been assigned a time slot to purchase tickets. I'll still be on my trip at that point, so I'll have to see if I can get the system to work from overseas. If it does, you may be reading about the L.A. games in a future travelogue of mine.

TUESDAY, JULY 28

CHESTER, ENGLAND TO SWANSEA, WALES

While things went a bit differently than my original plans, this was still an enjoyable day. Originally I'd planned to take the Heart of Wales Line across the middle of Great Britain's western realm. The train that runs on that line only uses a single car, and with the crowding on yesterday's trains, I suspected that might not be particularly pleasant—especially with luggage. Between that and the fact that I wanted to sleep in just a bit later, I changed my plans.

I actually heard my alarm this morning. It went off at 7am. It was about an hour later when I finished packing up my stuff and walked across the street to Chester station. I stopped by a W.H. Smith shop (formerly a bookstore and newsagent, now they mostly sell food) in the station and got a meal deal. It was intended for lunch, but with a ham and cheese croissant for the main and orange/mango juice for the drink, it worked well for breakfast.

The fare gates at Chester scanned my pass fine. There was a sensor on the flipping doors, though, and it reacted when I pushed my bags through, nearly trapping me as the door shut. I was able to push myself forward, but I did get a bit squashed.

At about 8:30 I caught the first of three trains I'd take today. I was in the first class car on an Avanti West Coast train. This was the company that cancelled the train I was supposed to take from Glasgow down to Preston last weekend. If the short ride I had today is any indication, their first class service is outstanding. The car attendant immediately gave me a menu and seemed surprised that I didn't want to have breakfast. It was just a twenty-minute ride, though, so it would be unlikely I'd have been able to eat most of the offerings. I did have a cup of coffee, though. I also had a very comfortable seat and one of the best wi-fi connections I've had on a British train.

Avanti is an Italian company that runs trains in western Britain. Since this train originated in Wales, they had bilingual signage on the train. I was particularly amused that they gave the destination as "Llundain". That's Welsh for "London", though it would be pronounced roughly like "SHIN-dine".

I got off at Crewe, a small town east of Liverpool that is a major interchange point for almost all of Britain's rail operators. I'm not sure much of anyone actually goes to Crewe, but it is a major station where passengers change trains. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the train I needed to switch to would actually be on the same platform I arrived on. I just needed to wait about fifteen minutes for it to arrive.

My second train of the day was a Transport for Wales service. While not quite as crowded as the ones I was on yesterday, this two-car train was very busy. Fortunately about the same number of people left the train as got on at Crewe, so I was able to get a seat.

Most of my trip southward along the English/Wesh border was rather dull. There were several nasty-looking cities (notably Shrewsbury, which appeared to have a completely abandoned historic downtown) and lots of flat farmland. They were growing more familiar crops here, including corn—though it didn't look particularly healthy. They also had what looked like high-intensity grazing land, with hundreds of cattle crammed into tiny fields. They looked remarkably like the finishing lots we have in Iowa, but I'm pretty sure the cattle were just eating grass.

A lot of the time I couldn't really see anything out the windows at all. They'd often plant a screen of trees, which I assume are to prevent the rail line from disturbing people who live nearby. It also keeps passengers from seeing what's around.

While the train's destination was Cardiff, I got off one stop shy of there, at the place British rail maps refer to as "Newport (South Wales)". The parenthetical addition is to distinguish it from a town in England near Birmingham. Newport is the easternmost of three major cities that make what amounts to a megalopolis that stretches for about 60 miles along the north end of the Bristol channel on the south coast of Wales. Newport in particular appears to be the distribution center for every company on the western side of Britain.

The itinerary both Google Maps and Transport for Wales suggested allowed for a five-minute transfer at Newport. When I saw that the next train would be on a different platform, I seriously doubted I'd make it. I made a dash for the elevator, though. I went up, across a long walkway, and down again, and I made it just in time for the next train to arrive. I was amazed that such a quick transfer was possible.

My final train of the day was with the Great Western Railway, which would be the main company I'd travel with for the rest of my trip. GWR is centered in London. They mostly serve southwest England, but one branch extends into southern Wales. The Wales GWR route didn't serve real food in first class, but they did offer snacks and drinks. I had coffee and a flapjack. The latter doesn't mean "pancake" in Britain. In America we'd call it a "bar" of the sort you might see at a school fundraiser. This one was made of oatmeal and caramel. It wasn't bad, but it won't be my choice in the future.

My destination was Swansea (SWAN-zee), the city at the western end of the south Wales megalopolis. My hotel (another Premier Inn) was about the furthest I've been from a train station. It was a straight shot down Swansea High Street, though. On the way I passed the ruins of Swansea castle. This is another English castle built in the 13th Century when England was trying to solidify its control over Wales. Much of it was purposely destroyed in the early 20th Century when a newspaper company bought much of the castle grounds. Interestingly, the famous Welsh writer Dylan Thomas worked for that newspaper (the *South Wales Post*) before he moved to London. When the newspaper relocated to a suburban location around the year 2000, the land was repurposed to a public square and the remaining parts of the castle were stabilized. Just as in Flint, there really wasn't much to see, but it is fascinating to see centuries-old ruins in the middle of a modern downtown.



Swansea Castle

The Premier Inn is part of the City Gates complex, a new development that is designed to look old. It's located where the historic gates to the long-destroyed walled city were, and today the complex includes a couple of hotels, a shopping mall, a bunch of restaurants, some condos, and an enormous parking ramp—all in the same brick building. Instead of overlooking the city walls, it overlooks Victoria Road, a four-lane highway that runs along the coast. While it's fake, the building is still pretty. The part the Premier Inn is in is round, which also gives the rooms a quirky design.

I did not have early check-in tonight, but I was able to leave my bags at the desk while I explored the city. Across Victoria Road is the old docks area, which has had a lot of urban renewal in the 21st Century. There's a cineplex here (amusingly named in honor of Dylan Thomas), some government buildings, a public market, and two major museums—the Swansea Museum and the National Museum at the Waterfront.

The Swansea Museum is more than a century old, and it sort of comes across as a stuffy old museum. It was interesting to go through, though. They have Roman and Celtic artifacts, a floor of natural history exhibits, lots of stuff from the Industrial Revolution (including ceramics and stuff made of copper, which was manufactured here). There were also multiple exhibits on World War II. I was surprised to find that America naval troops trained for D-Day in Swansea. Another exhibit looks at criminals and outcasts of the Victorian era, mostly drunkards and prostitutes. Finally there was a gallery with the work of local artists. It certainly is an eclectic museum.

The other museum is the one tourists are recommended to see in Swansea. The Waterfront Museum is one of seven national museums run by the government of Wales. (Interestingly, none of them is in Cardiff, the capital.) While a bit too high-tech and interactive for my taste, it did convey good information. They begin by looking at the landscape of Wales (which is surprisingly similar to Scotland, but with a milder climate) and looking at how that shaped life since prehistoric times. Wales has been blessed with four main minerals: coal, iron, copper, and slate. All four of those have been important to the economy of the country. It's also surrounded by water and full of grassy hills, which have made for good fishing and farming.



Devil statue carved after a church burned down – Swansea Museum

They jump from early history to the year 1851, which is when Britain took its first modern census. There's a huge exhibit on all the work that went into taking an accurate census. In Wales that was complicated by the fact that at the time more than half the population didn't speak English and most were illiterate in Welsh as well.

Another large exhibit looks at ships and the life of those who have worked on them over the centuries. Except for how ships are powered, it really hasn't changed all that much. There was a small exhibit on farming. (Apparently another of the seven national museums is devoted exclusively to that.) Then they looked at how life changed in Wales during and after the Industrial Revolution. There were galleries devoted to all the principal industries of Wales. They looked in detail at how coal, metal, and slate are all mined and then processed. There was a gallery of products that were made in Wales—though my sense was that not much is manufactured here anymore. One of the most interesting sections looked at how people—rich and poor—made and spent their money over the years. Finally there was a hall devoted to supposedly famous Welsh people. I must confess, though, that the only one of those I'd heard of was Dylan Thomas.

They had an interesting gift shop at the Waterfront Museum. The main thing I picked up there was a children's Christmas book featuring a dog named Swansea Jack. It's a fun little book.

It was right at the real check-in time when I finished with the museums, so I went back to the Premier Inn, reclaimed my bag, and got my key. Then I mostly just lounged around the room for a while. My biggest accomplishment was paying a couple of bills online.

For dinner tonight I got "click and collect" (takeout ordered online) from a restaurant next door to the hotel called Wagamama. This is a London-based chain with about the same pretensions as Red Lobster. They feature east Asian cuisine. I got a Japanese donburi bowl (rice with chicken with sesame seeds, carrots, pea shoots, edamame, green onions, and kimchi), and on the side I got a small order of Korean barbecue pork ribs. The ribs were outstanding, and the meal as a whole was very good. The only real issue was that it didn't come with a fork, not even the wooden ones that are standard for British take-out. I made do by using the kimchi pot (which was plastic) for a spoon, though I realized later that I could have used one of the spoons the hotel provides for stirring coffee and tea.

After dinner I mostly just worked on the travelogue. For some reason I couldn't get the TV to work (most likely there's a control switch somewhere that I couldn't locate), so I didn't even get my daily dose of British programming. It was a laid back evening, and eventually I went off to bed.

EDNESDAY, ULY 28 SWANSEA & ST. DAVID'S, WALES

Some would look at my schedule today and say it was kind of pointless. I got up early and spent six hours making a round trip while spending only about two and a half hours at my destination. That said, I thoroughly enjoyed the whole day.

I set my alarm for 5:30 this morning and was more or less awake when it started beeping. I was pleased to find that the shirts I'd washed yesterday were nearly dry just from hanging overnight; I didn't even have to use an iron.

I left the hotel at 6:10 and walked up the high street to the station. I smelled strong wood smoke in the air, the same thing I'd encountered in Chicago at the start of the trip. While I can't say for sure, I suspect the winds must have been right to bring smoke from those fires in the Pyrenees north to Britain.

I didn't get breakfast at the hotel, and nothing was open yet at the station. So I just stopped at a vending machine on the platform. It only accepted credit cards, and I was pleasantly surprised that mine worked with no problem. A lot of British vending machines are card only; I suppose that makes them less vulnerable to vandalism. I had cheese and onion flavored potato chips and diet pink lemonade flavored 7-Up—not a particularly nutritious breakfast, but it would have to do.

The signs in the station said that my train would leave at 6:57am from Platform 2. There was a two-car train on that platform, which I and about a dozen other people waiting assumed would be the train. Then, at about 6:55, they announced that instead we'd be leaving from Platform 1. Fortunately Swansea is a stub-end station, so all the platforms are connected at ground level. There was also a two-car train on that platform, and we all assumed we should board it. As it turned out that wasn't our train either. The train we were to board actually arrived from Cardiff and parked behind the train that was already on Platform 1. We had to walk forward to board it and we only had about half a minute before the doors shut and it was on its way again. It was all a bit confusing, but at least I made it.

I took a seat a row in front of a high school aged boy who was sleeping sprawled across two seats. He was out like a light and didn't even move at all when the train started moving. When the conductor came around to scan tickets, she had to shove the boy rather aggressively to wake him. It turned out he was supposed to have changed to a different train in Swansea but slept through the transfer. I have no idea where he was going or when he was supposed to be there, but he had to get off at the next major station and take a train back into Swansea.

The station where that boy got off was called "Llanelli", which Welsh recorded announcement pronounced roughly like "chan-ASH-ee". Those double-l's are everywhere in Welsh. A few people on this train were actually speaking Welsh, and the conductor was definitely bilingual. Welsh may not be used as much as say French in Quebec, but it's definitely used way more than Scottish.

Once we passed Llanelli, we were in a truly rural area. From the train it reminded me most of France. It's fairly flat farmland with neat hedges between the fields and quaint looking little towns built mostly of stone every few miles. Brightly colored wildflowers (particularly buttercups, violets, Queen Anne's lace, and the Welsh national flower, the daffodil) grew all along the railroad tracks. We also had long stretches where we ran right along the south coast of Wales. While I was on the wrong side of the train for the best views, it was still a beautiful ride. The trees were short and gnarled here, kind of like they are in Louisiana. I suppose the ocean affects their growth.

We got to my first destination, Haverfordwest (which is pronounced like the possessive "Harvard's" by everyone except the train's electronic voice) right on time at 8:25am. I'd have to catch a bus here for the rest of my journey, but that wouldn't leave until

9:03am. I filled much of the time by going into a little café (the Cleddau) in the station. They had some of the cheapest food I've seen in Britain. I got a ham omelet for £5. It didn't come with any side dishes, but that's still a pretty good deal.

When I finished my omelet there were two TrawsCymru buses parked outside the station. There were no benches at the bus stop, so I ended up sitting on a support intended for people to lock their bicycles to. That worked remarkably well. The driver for one (a middle aged man) was spending his layover vaping, while the other driver (a young woman) went into the café and emerged with a takeaway coffee.

At 8:53 the second bus turned on a sign that said "T-11", which was the bus I needed. I asked what the fare was and ended up paying £6.40 for a return ticket. The single fare was £3.65, so that is a bit of a savings. It also let me get rid of six 1-pound coins I'd accumulated, though I still have tons more.

We set off a minute early, at 9:02am. The new part of Haverfordwest is basically one roundabout after another. Most are multi-lane roundabouts, and I'd think it would be a nightmare to negotiate a bus through them. I was glad I'd checked the bus schedule ahead of time and knew that the bus originated from the railway station. Google Maps had suggested I walk to the Haverfordwest bus interchange, which is half a mile away. It would have required crossing three different roundabouts, which as a pedestrian would be all but impossible.

Besides the railway and bus stations, the new part of Haverfordwest is a combination of factories, car dealers, and big box businesses, with little subdivisions of duplexes off the main roads. Beyond that we got to the old part of town, which is very different. It reminded me of the little towns in Spain, with two-story stucco buildings (here mostly plaster over stone). The main difference between Wales and Spain is that in Spain the buildings are always whitewashed, while in Wales they're painted in a wide range of colors.

The streets in the old part of town are very narrow, about 1½ lanes wide. Much of the time cars are parked on the sidewalk, but they protrude into the already narrow street. A couple of times oncoming cars had to back up to make room for the bus to pass.

The wide roads in the new town don't continue out of town. We followed highway A-487, which is the main road through Pembrokeshire. Most of the time it's two lanes, but with no shoulder at all and tall hedges right next to the road. The "good" parts of the highway have a walking path at the side that essentially acts like a shoulder. There are other parts, though—particularly on hills—where the road narrows and signs denote who has the right of way. Everyone drives with headlights on at all times, and they often honk when they reach blind corners to warn oncoming traffic.

Pembrokeshire is another place that Margaret traced our ancestors to, though I'm sure it looked quite different when they were there. While most of the area is farmland, it's also a big resort area. There are campgrounds (locally called "caravan parks") every few miles, most of them offering views of the Irish Sea. Since school holidays were on, most of those were very busy.

Aside from the tourism, the towns along here look traditional, with one big exception—solar panels. It's really weird to see stone houses that are obviously centuries old with solar panels all over their roofs. Britain may be known for clouds and rain, but they're big on solar energy. While wind is actually their biggest source of power (it was turbines placed by his Scottish golf course that made Donald Trump hate wind energy), all those solar panels are an important reason that nearly two-thirds of British power is renewable.

Road signs and markings in Wales are all bilingual, with the Welsh invariably first. Most of the places have both English and Welsh names. Sometimes those are similar, while other times I had no clue what the relationship between the names was.

We passed one particularly interesting town along the way. It was called Roch, and it had a lot of quite new houses and a big campground where almost all the visitors had surfboards. What made the place stand out, though, was that it also had an old stone castle. The two different eras didn't really fit together.

My bus ticket said my destination was "ST. DAVID'S CITY". It also said "TY DDEWI", which literally means "house of David" in Welsh. I'd chosen to come here for three main reasons. One of course is that my name is David. It stood out when my former student Tommy Kollasch was ordained earlier this summer and did blessings for attendees afterwards. He included St. David in his blessing for me. David is a saint no one ever thinks of in America, but he is the patron of Wales. I'd end up buying a flag of St. David's that I'll put in my room at school. The Celtic cross in gold on a black background will fit right in at Garrigan.

The city of St. David's also stood out because it's the smallest place in Britain that is officially designated a "city". St. David's is the size of Bancroft (less than 2,000), and most British places that size are called villages. The reason St. David's is a city is that it has the oldest cathedral in Wales, and that's the other reason I came here.

St. David was a monk who lived in the 6th Century and founded a monastery on the land where the cathedral now stands. He founded other churches and monasteries in Wales, England, Ireland, and France. People began venerating him almost immediately after his death. A shrine was erected at the monastery on the Pembrokeshire coast that became a sight of pilgrimage in the middle ages. Construction on the church that is still in use began in the 11th Century, after William the Conqueror came to the sight to pray. Interestingly, that was nearly a hundred years before David was officially proclaimed a saint by the Vatican.

To get to the cathedral from the bus stop in the center of St. David's I walked down and down and down. It seems odd to me to have a cathedral in a valley instead of at the top of a hill. The valley provided good solitude for the monks, though, so that determined the place they'd build the cathedral. I went downhill on a side street called the Pebbles, continued down about thirty stairs, and then had a long walk down a very steep ramp (with signs saying those with disability aids should seek assistance) until I finally got to the bottom of the valley. From there I had to go up a few steps to get to the main entrance, and there are steps up and down all over the church itself.

St. David's is far from the most beautiful church in the world, but it looks and feels extremely old. While parts of the cathedral were built as recently as the 1700s, other parts have been standing for a thousand years, and the most of it was completed by the early 1200s. It's comparatively simple as cathedrals go, with mostly clear windows and simple wooden pews with hand-knitted covers on the kneeler pillows. There are a few modern touches, but even those are designed to blend in with the rest of the building. They have encountered numerous structural problems over the centuries, including stone and plaster falling from the ceiling of one of the side chapels within the past month. The floor in particular is very uneven, which made it a bit of a chore to get around. It was fascinating to see, though, and many individual parts were beautiful.



**Tower of St. David's Cathedral,
together with the non-so-saintly David**



Bishop's Palace – St. David's

the Anglican church is the established church in England, ordained by the government. The Archbishop of Canterbury meets regularly with the monarch and the prime minister, and Anglican principles are often codified into English law. While other churches (Catholic and Protestant, and also non-Christian houses of worship) are legal in England, they aren't officially recognized by the government in England. In 1920 Wales officially passed the Act of Disestablishment and did away with government recognition of any particular church. Scotland has its own unique situation. (There is an established Church of Scotland, which is Presbyterian, since Anglicans are far in the minority there.)

I was intrigued to thumb through the *Book of Common Prayer for the Church in Wales* at St. David's. While the liturgy at York was quite similar to what Episcopal churches in America use, the Church in Wales liturgy actually seemed closer to the modern Catholic mass than to that of the Church of England.



Welsh rarebit lunch

I had lunch at the cathedral café, a second location of a bakery called Mamgu that has their main business in downtown St. David's. The primary dish I had was Welsh rarebit, a dish that was created to make a filling meal out of cheap ingredients. It's basically cheese on toast. This one had a base of very hearty bread that had been toasted on a grill. It was then topped with a cheese sauce made with beer and mustard. Traditionally that was the whole dish. At a pretentious café they served it with a raisin and bacon chutney and a side salad with balsamic vinaigrette. It's still just cheese on toast, though, but it was very tasty.

I also bought half a dozen Welsh cakes to go from the café. These are small round flatbreads cooked on a griddle. It's basically the same ingredients that

would go into an American biscuit, but quite a bit denser. I snacked on the Welsh cakes throughout the afternoon and evening. I didn't like them as well as the Welsh rarebit, but I've certainly had worse treats.

I made my way back up the hill from the cathedral, which really was easier than going down. I waited in the public square and e-mailed off the pictures I'd taken using wi-fi from a gelato shop. I considered actually buying some gelato, but I figured I should make my way to the bus stop before the scheduled departure time. I was glad I did, since the bus arrived just a minute or so after I got there, and it left about seven minutes ahead of schedule.



**Coast in Pembrokeshire, Wales
from the T-11 bus**

The bus ride back was the same route as before, though this time I made a point to be on the coast side of the vehicle. I should mention that buses like the T-11 are something that basically doesn't exist in America. It's essentially a city bus, but it runs over a widespread area. The closest thing we have are the shuttles that take old and handicapped people to Mason City to go to Wal-Mart or the hospital there. People have to make arrangements for those in advance, though. For the buses in Wales, you just show up and go.

I arrived at the Haverfordwest train station forty minutes before the next eastbound train would leave. That's actually not too bad, since trains on this route only run every two hours. The café was shut down, and so were the restrooms and indoor waiting area. So I just waited on the platform until the train came. Eventually about two dozen other people joined me, many of whom complained that they couldn't use the toilet. The train back to Swansea was fairly crowded, but not as bad as some of the other Transport for Wales trains I'd taken.

I stopped twice on the walk back from the station. First I stopped at an international supermarket, where I had fun browsing through various foreign foods and ended up buying some juice that was labeled primarily in Russian. I also stopped at what will probably be the last ATM I patronize on this trip, since the debit card will stop working at the end of the month.

All I had for dinner were the rest of the Welsh cakes and that juice I'd bought. The omelet and Welsh rarebit provided plenty of calories for the day, though.

Today was the day my time slot came up for buying tickets for the 2028 Olympics, and I spent a good part of the evening trying to do that. Obviously thousands of others were doing this at the exact same time. Their website worked, but at I had to go through a long wait before I could even log in—and they wouldn't let me open another tab or else the wait counter reset. Once I did get in I found more than once that tickets they said were available weren't (at least at the cheapest prices) when I actually got to check-out. In the end I did manage to buy three tickets, so I will be planning to go to L.A. two years from now. I'll be watching Olympic baseball, badminton, and flag football over two days in July 2028. I'd love to see something like swimming or gymnastics, but those cost hundreds or even thousands of dollars per ticket. The cheapest of the ones I got was badminton, which was just \$28—including processing fees.

I got caught up on this and then repacked my stuff. I'd have another early departure tomorrow, though not quite so early as today's.

THURSDAY, **J**ULY 30 **SWANSEA, WALES TO PLYMOUTH, ENGLAND VIA CORNWALL**

While it doesn't really seem like I did a lot today, this actually ended up being a surprisingly long day. While I'd set my alarm for 6:00, I was wide awake at 5:30. I spent some time working with the pictures I'd taken yesterday and inserting a few into the travelogue.

I made the slow walk up to Swansea station. About the only other people out were sanitation workers. They were desperately needed, as trash was everywhere after what must have been a lively Wednesday night. Fortunately on the third floor of the Premier Inn I hadn't heard any of the partying. Nightlife in general seems to be quite big all over Britain, though that may be artificially inflated based on the places I've stayed. If I'd spent the night in places like Yarm or Oban it might well have been more tame.

I stopped across the street from the station at a Tesco Express convenience store. I picked up a meal deal I'd have for breakfast (getting it with chips and a drink was actually cheaper than just getting the sandwich) and also some toothpaste, since the travel tube I'd brought was exhausted.

My train originated in Swansea, and it was already on the platform when I arrived. I ended up boarding thirty-five minutes early. It was certainly more comfortable to spend that time in a first class seat than in a bench on the platform.

There was a food service in first class on this train, so I had a second breakfast. The main item was a microwaved bacon bagel (like the other breakfast rolls I'd had, it was just the bacon—no egg or cheese). The bagel was oddly fluffy, but it wasn't bad. I also had a packaged pastry that the bag said was a "orange and hazelnut crown". The attendant described it by saying "It's better than it looks", which was correct. There was also orange juice and coffee, so not a bad spread.

While we were still in Wales, the signage and announcements on this train were in English only. It was a fairly busy train, which made me glad I had a guaranteed first class seat. We took a different, more rural route towards Cardiff than we had the other day. A lot of the passengers shifted at Cardiff, and we traded some more at Newport.

The train's air conditioning was running far too well. It was in the teens Celsius out (lower 60s Fahrenheit), and with the air on it was absolutely freezing on the train. I'd packed my jacket away, because hotter weather was predicted further south, but I wished I had it easily accessible.

We entered a long tunnel that took us under the Bristol Channel, where we crossed from Wales back into England. I got off the train at Bristol Parkway station. Stations with "parkway" in their name are suburban park-and-rides, generally built right next to a motorway exit. This one mostly afforded a view of a strip mall.



Uncleared trash on Cross-Country train

floor by the toilet between cars. The overcrowding continued until we reached Taunton, about two-thirds of the way to our ultimate destination.

The landscape in west England is a weird combination of farmland and industrial. The farmhouses here have a surprisingly American look. The area actually looked a lot like Indiana or western Ohio. For much of our ride through this area we paralleled the M-5 motorway, which is the main north—south highway route through the west of England. It looks a lot like the Pennsylvania Turnpike, four lanes of constant traffic, limited shoulders, and just a metal barrier for the median. The train was going significantly faster than the motorway traffic, by the way.

Mentioning the motorway reminds me that I haven't really talked about U.K. cars. They are almost universally very new, and I'd estimate at least half of them are either electric or hybrid. Electric cars would actually work quite well in a comparatively compact country where most of the driving people do is local. The registration tax is apparently based on fuel consumption, which provides a big incentive to buy electric vehicles.

Pretty much every vehicle in the U.K. is smaller than its equivalent in the U.S. That includes trucks, which are designed to maneuver on the smaller roads they have here. While they are still the length of a shipping container, they have a flat front rather than the big snout you see at the front of American semi cabs.

It was cloudy and hazy this morning, and it appeared some rain had passed early. The platforms were wet, but it didn't appear to actually be raining anywhere we were.

The farm buildings began to look older and more traditional as we made our way southward, the sort of thing you picture when you think of the English countryside. Eventually we got to Exeter (whose main station is called St. David's), which is an old-looking city almost like the British version of Edinburgh.

I transferred at Bristol Parkway to a service operated by Cross-Country Trains. This is based in Birmingham, and it was easily the worst train I'd been on in Britain. The seat I'd reserved had garbage stacked both on the seat and the table, and there was various trash at almost all the other empty seats as well. I found one that was available and moved the trash that was there to a different seat. The place I'd chosen turned out to have a very uncomfortable seat, but I think that may have been the case with the entire train. Everything seemed rather patched together, too. For instance, there was duct tape holding the carpet down on the floor.

I knew from things I'd read before that Bristol was one of the places most damaged in the Blitz during World War II. We had a long stop at the quaintly named Bristol Temple Meads station. The station itself does indeed look quaint, but it's surrounded by public housing blocks that could just as easily be in Russia. Most of Bristol has that same post-war "beauty".

On most U.K. trains first class is at one end of the train or the other (usually the end closest to the London terminus). On the Cross-Country train for some reason first class was the middle car of five. That confused many passengers, and many ended up getting kicked out of the car by the conductor. They had basically nowhere to go, though, because it appeared standard class was over-booked. I saw a large group of people sitting on the

We went through Exmouth (at the mouth of the River Exe, which Exeter is also on) and then Newton Abbot. There was no longer a crowd in the vestibule at that point, so I decided to use the restroom. Like everything else on this train, it was filthy. It did suffice for my needs, though.



Devon coast, near Exmouth

They finally cleared trash from tables in first class as we crossed Devon, the last county in our journey on this train. While the landscape in Devon is mostly rural and pastoral, it's spoiled a bit by enormous power lines that seem to be absolutely everywhere. There are a lot of wind turbines and fields of solar panels all over Devon, and I suppose these get that power to more populated places.

It was around 11:30 when we arrived at Plymouth, the major port of southwest England and of course the place from which the Mayflower set off in early 1620. There's pretty close to nothing in Plymouth that would look remotely like anything the pilgrims might have seen. The place was pretty much obliterated in World War II, so the oldest stuff today dates to the late 1940s. Downtown Plymouth is mostly from the 1970s, though I will say it's aged better than a lot of stuff from that era.

For a seaside city, Plymouth is extremely hilly. The strings of '40s rowhouses wind up hills in every direction from downtown. Fortunately I didn't have to get to those. However, the railway station is in a trench just north of downtown, and to get to my hotel I had to walk up and then down a steep hill—not the easiest thing to do with luggage.



Fountain on Armada Plaza – Plymouth

The focus of downtown Plymouth is a brutalist plaza that was surprisingly lively. The plaza is in the center of an enormous roundabout (the equivalent of four city blocks) that distributes major highways in eight different directions. The roundabout is actually elevated over the plaza, with underpasses so pedestrians don't actually have to cross any of the highways. The plaza then continues south of the roundabout all the way to the harbor. My hotel, the Copthorne, had one side facing onto the plaza and another on a massive dual carriageway (four-lane highway) that mostly seems to carry truck traffic to the port.

I left my bags at the hotel desk and then made my way back to the station. While it's basically a straight shot, it was surprisingly hard to find the entrance to the station coming from downtown. The main route mostly looks like it leads to a parking ramp and a big skyscraper that houses the University of Plymouth Medical College. I eventually found that the station itself was hidden behind the medical school, but it really isn't well marked.



Cornwall countryside, near Truro

imagine. I was particularly surprised to see lettuce flourishing in a place as far north as Winnipeg. The Gulf Stream really does moderate the climate. There's also lots of forest in Cornwall. Almost all of it is deciduous trees, so I'd think it must be beautiful in fall.

I bought some drinks at a W.H. Smith in the station and then checked the departures board and was pleased that a westbound train would be leaving soon. The train I boarded was also run by Great Western Railway, but this one was a two-car shuttle like the little trains I'd taken in Wales. It actually originated in Exeter and was running down the coast to Penzance. They run variations of that route every half hour.

We crawled on a viaduct between the hills of residential Plymouth. Eventually we crossed a rickety old bridge over the Tamar River (right next to a much nicer suspension bridge that carries cars and pedestrians) and entered Cornwall, the southwestern-most county in Great Britain. My mother wrote about visiting Cornwall on a trip she and my dad made where they drove all around England in the late '70s. While I think it has changed a bit since then (among other things there's a dual carriageway that goes all the way to Penzance), it does come across as a rather backwards and forgotten place.

Cornwall's two main industries are farming and tourism. They seem to grow just about anything you can

The train travels quite slowly through Cornwall. The maximum speed between towns is 50mph, but it makes a stop about every ten minutes. The only place I'd actually heard of that we passed through was Truro, and I mostly associate it with a famous hymn tune. Central Truro looked like the small towns in Wales, but its outskirts could have been an American suburb.

I made an interesting comment in the notes I keep for this journal. You read about Americans being loud and obnoxious tourists, but there's a lot of Brits who would give the worst Americans a run for their money. The train down to Penzance had a middle-aged couple from Reading on it with a woman loud enough that the entire car could hear every word she said—and she just wouldn't shut up. She had something to say about everything we passed, most of it negative. Her husband kept trying to calm her down, but she just went on and on and on.

Much more interesting was a man sitting across the aisle in the row in front of me who appeared to be either a director or set designer. He was going through a script for the play *The Lion in Winter*, making notes, and drawing sketches. It was fascinating to watch him work.

There were signs in the stations we passed that billed this service as the "Mid-Cornwall Metro" and touted that thanks to a subsidy from the county council train service was now provided at a minimum of hourly intervals to destinations all over the county. It's weird to use the term "metro" in a rural area, but I've been to cities where suburban train service is less frequent.

Eventually we reached Penzance, and of course songs like "I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General" kept going through my mind. I was amused that the recorded voice on the train pronounced the "a" in "Penzance" as "ah". That seemed odd, since Britain is the place where they say "pasta" as "PASS-tuh" and "taco" as "TACK-o". I'd find that the people of Penzance itself used the same short "a" we use in America.

Penzance also looks very American on its outskirts—full of strip malls and big box stores. That ends abruptly right by the railway station, and beyond there everything is rather consciously quaint. Even the local Premier Inn is in an old mill that they restored to be a hotel. Penzance eats and breaths tourism, and they make sure they have something that visitors want to see.

The main thing I did in Penzance was have a very late lunch. I went into a local bakery called Warren's, which had signage that looked remarkably like Gregg's. Their menu was quite different, though. Warren's specializes in traditional Cornish pasties (pronounced "PASS-tees"), which are essentially empanadas. While minced lamb is the traditional filling, I had a ham hock pasty. The filling also included a white sauce, potatoes, and various root vegetables (I think the main one was turnip). They're designed so they can be eaten by hand (traditionally miners took them with them for lunches), though I used a knife and fork. It was one of those must-try things, and it wasn't bad. I doubt I'll have another, though. What was much tastier was the berry bakewell I had with it. A bakewell is another kind of bar, this one layers of cookie and jam. I washed it all down with an Americano, which came straight from the electronic machine.



High Street – Penzance

My other stop in Penzance was at SportDirect, a chain that sells clothing and sporting goods in every town in Britain. Usually these are in strip malls on the outskirts, but the one in Penzance was in a historic downtown building. I ended up buying a couple of shirts there. I was intending to stop at a gift shop, but the only ones I could find had arty stuff rather than simple postcards, magnets, and the like.

The departure board showed there was a 15-minute wait before the next train would leave Penzance. That was the train I took, though I'd have probably done better to wait 45 minutes for the one after that. I boarded the first train, and it ended up departing six minutes late. We were told that the delay was due to having to reset their safety systems. This was another two-car shuttle, and it was very crowded.

As we made the first couple of stops, passengers started noticing that each time the train accelerated, water would run out from the ceiling. We ended up making a long stop at the town of Hayle. The car attendant called her supervisor and explained the problem. She confirmed that the substance leaking was in fact just water (an issue with the air conditioning system), and after about ten minutes we wee on our way again.

We made longer than normal stops at the next couple of towns as well. Then the attendant announced that this service would be running express to Truro and then terminating there. Apparently one of the doors was locked in the open position, and safety

regulations would not allow continuing with that malfunction. Those who wanted to go to stations before Truro had to exit the train now and board a following train, while those who were going beyond should exit at Truro and connect there. Anyone in the second car had to move up to the first to get away from the malfunctioning door.

I got off at Truro, and there was just a short wait before the next train on the line (the one that would have left half an hour later from Penzance) arrived. It was running late because our disabled train had delayed it. The train I ended up taking was one of the few trains in Britain that is given a name. This one was called “the Cornishman”, and it is known for offering elegant dining at an extra fee. I didn’t opt for that, but an advantage of making the switch was that they did also have standard first-class service on this train. My supper tonight was what amounted to a “meal deal” caprese sandwich (with chopped chicken, oregano-flavored mayonnaise, and spinach), together with a bag of crisps and a little package of salted caramel biscuits.

The trip from Penzance to Plymouth is about 70 miles. It’s supposed to take about an hour and a half by train (and about the same by car). Today the journey lasted nearly three hours, but eventually we made it back to Plymouth.

Check-in was quite easy. Unlike most British hotels, the Copthorne didn’t even ask for my passport. This was the one place I was staying in the U.K. that wasn’t prepaid. The clerk just asked if she should charge the card on file, though, and she didn’t need to see the actual card. I was surprised that without realizing it I’d booked a “club” room, their top level of accommodation. The rate was cheaper than I’ve paid for midrange hotels in Des Moines or Minneapolis (just over \$100, including all taxes), and the club rate included breakfast. The room was by far the largest I’d had in Britain. It was a corner room with windows on the south and east that looked over the urban renewal that is downtown Plymouth. The building itself dates to the ‘70s, and it had a rather Scandinavian design that was very bright. The only real problem was that there was one usable plug in the entire room—probably fine when the place was built, but not great in the electronic age. Fortunately my voltage convertor allows up to three things to be plugged in at once. They all had to be in an awkward position by the TV, though.

Another little bonus at this hotel was that they provided a complimentary box of fudge from a local chocolatier and also a package of hot chocolate with the tea and instant coffee. I enjoyed the fudge as my dessert after dinner on the train. I could have gotten a complimentary alcoholic drink at the bar, but I didn’t bother with that.

The Copthorne also had a much wider TV package than any of the other hotels I’d stayed at in Britain. I spent about half an hour just pressing the channel up button before eventually landing on a quiz show. I watched that and then a bit more of *24 Hours in A & E*. Then it was time to settle in for the night.

FRIDAY, **J**ULY 31

PLYMOUTH, ENGLAND TO LONDON & SLOUGH, ENGLAND

I’d set my alarm for six this morning, but as has so often been the case on this trip, I was wide awake before it went off. That said, I could tell that I was further south since it wasn’t yet really bright out.

The shower was probably the most disappointing part of the room. They had one of those “rainforest” heads that barely drips. I far prefer good pressure. I will say, though, that it was nice to have a walk-in shower instead of having to make my way over the side of an extremely deep tub.

Since breakfast was included, I took advantage of it. Unfortunately there were two large groups of German and Swedish package tours having breakfast at the same time I was. The buffet was placed on tables all over the restaurant, and there were back-ups at all of them. The worst was at the coffee machine. There was only one, and it took about a minute to make each person’s brew. That said, the food itself was fine, and I certainly couldn’t complain about value.

I checked out and made my way back to the station. Particularly the downhill stretch was challenging, as it was very steep. I purposely stopped a couple of times to keep the wheeled bag from running away.

I settled on a bench on the platform and began to work on yesterday’s write-up. A train to Exeter came and went, and before long my train arrived. I noticed the first-class carriages were clear at the front, so I high-tailed it down the platform toward them. In the process my computer dropped onto the platform. Fortunately it wasn’t damaged and someone else picked it up for me.

It turned out I needn’t have rushed, as the train spends a fifteen-minute layover in Plymouth. I think that’s padding in case it gets delayed in Cornwall. I found my seat, and the attendant had already served me coffee and juice before we had set off. I also had another of their bagels—this time with egg and cheese, but no meat. It was better than the one with just bacon, but I do wonder why they can’t just put everything together in one sandwich.

I spent most of this trip getting caught up on the travelogue. It’s three hours and fifteen minutes from Plymouth to London, so I knew I’d have a long time to work on it. Because of that, I didn’t bother doing much at the computer last night.

While we made all the stops in Devon, beyond Taunton the train ran express all the way to Reding (“RED-ing”, which is close enough to London that people commute there). The train isn’t quite as fast as those on the east coast main line, but it zipped right along. The tracks here aren’t great for high speeds, and it was a bumpy ride. At one point a set of golf clubs someone had stored next to the luggage rack was knocked over into the aisle.

From Reading onward it was pretty much solid development. This area, Berkshire, is basically the New Jersey of England. While it was traditionally known as the home of Windsor Castle and the Ascot racecourse, today Berkshire has the “head office” of just about every company in Britain. The center of all the development is the Slough Trading Estate. (“Slough” rhymes with “how” in Britain, rather than “woo-hoo” like it does in Iowa.) This is a massive industrial park that is sandwiched between the railroad tracks to the south and a motorway to the north. All the way into London we passed warehouses and factories, though, as well as big box stores and quite American-looking suburban neighborhoods of single-family homes.



Norfolk Court – Paddington, Westminster

not rejected, and the transaction did go through.

When I’d left bags at hotels before checking in, they gave me a claim check and tied a strip with the same number around the handle of the bag. They don’t use claim checks at the Shakespeare Hotel, though. The clerk hand-wrote the date and a number on what amounted to wrist bands. He had me take a picture of those on my phone and told me I’d have to present that picture to reclaim the bags. He then tied those wrist bands around the handles and put them behind the desk. I was a bit anxious leaving, but I certainly wasn’t going to lug the bags all over London.



Picture of luggage tags from Shakespeare Hotel

I made my way back to Paddington station and got out the visitor Oyster card I’d bought for taking the London tube. I made my way down to the Bakerloo line and caught a southbound train. While it was crowded, I did manage to get a seat. I couldn’t help but notice that the car had been badly vandalized with graffiti, to the point that it looked like a New York subway train from the ‘70s. Aside from that, the ride was uneventful, and before long I was down at Piccadilly Circus, where I was supposed to transfer.

As I made my way over to the Piccadilly line, I heard an announcement that that line was closed due to engineering works. They actually had all the entrances to that part of the station completely blocked off. I spent a while staring at the map to see how else I could get to my destination. It turns out Covent Garden station (where I was headed) is only served by the Piccadilly line, and it didn’t appear any other stations were particularly close. I went on Google Maps, and they said the best way to get to my destination was a 15-minute walk. It appeared to be a straight shot from Piccadilly Circus, and surprisingly I actually headed out in the right direction. The walk took a full half hour, but I did eventually make it—sore knees and all. The first chance I got I took some ibuprofen, and that did help me feel better for the rest of the afternoon.

My destination was the London Transport Museum. This is run by Transport for London, the organization that runs the underground, London’s iconic double-decker buses, and most other forms of transport in the city. They trace the history of transportation in what they call “the world’s first real city”. (While there are legitimate arguments for that statement, I think a lot of people in Asia and Latin America would beg to differ.) I’ve been a transit nerd pretty much my whole adult life, so I was really looking forward to this museum.

I've been to three or four transit museums in different places, and none of the others compare to the New York Transit Museum, which is housed in an old subway station beneath Brooklyn. The London Transport Museum was good, but a lot of their exhibits were more oriented to kids than adults. I did enjoy the place, though, and I spent about an hour there.

I learned that the first form of transport in London was human powered—carrying the wealthy around in sedan chairs. That morphed into horse-drawn carriages and then into the horse-drawn omnibus. The first big improvement in transportation was the development of the horse-drawn tram. The difference between a bus and a tram is that a tram runs on steel tracks. That allowed horses to pull them with much less effort. There was still a problem with vast amounts of manure ending up on the streets, though.



**Mannequins posed in a 1960s tube car
London Transport Museum**

The manure problem was solved with electricity. Trams and trolleybuses transitioned to being powered by overhead wires. Those worked extremely well, and they're still used all over the world. Buses would eventually transition to diesel or "petrol" power, though today almost all London buses are electric—run by onboard batteries. The city, like most European capitals these days, has a low emission zone in its center where traditional combustion engines are prohibited. That was effectively required by the European Union, but it was retained in London after Brexit.

London was one of the first places in the world to use underground trains. It's interesting that the primary financing for the tube came from American Charles Yerkes, who also created the elevated systems in Chicago and Philadelphia. The underground originally ran with steam trains, and short above-ground sections were included so steam and smoke could be vented.

They had an interesting exhibit on the history and future of ticketing on the tube. With punched paper tickets (the original system) only about two people per minute could pass through a turnstile. With today's tap-to-pay system each transaction takes about three seconds, and they're working on systems that would be even faster. Part of what makes things take longer than they otherwise might is that fares in London are based on zones, so different trips can cost anywhere from £2.20 to £10.30. The system has to calculate and deduct the correct fare before the customer can proceed. That's also why they don't have a day pass like most cities do, though they do have a fare cap (£20, I think) after which every additional ride is free.

One of the most interesting exhibits looked at how the system was affected by the world wars. In addition to using the underground stations as bomb shelters (which I already knew) they made numerous adaptations to buses, mostly due to black-out regulations. Much of the tube system was damaged in World War II, and it took until the mid-1950s to recover.

I should have just made my way back to Piccadilly Circus after seeing the transit museum. Instead I followed Google Maps' directions to the nearest tube station and got completely lost in the process. In Google's defense, much of this was because the streets in central London really don't make much sense. None of them is really straight, they head off in unusual directions, and often there are no signs labeling which street is which.

I ended up spending nearly an hour searching for a tube station. While it was sort of a wild goose chase, I did get an interesting tour of central London. My main route included the Strand, Fleet Street, and Fetter's Lane, which took me past Kings College, a beautiful church called St. Mary's Le Strand, the Australian Embassy and the Royal Court of Justice. I also passed lots of other government buildings and a number of tourist-oriented gift shops. It was quite an interesting walk, just a bit longer than I'd imagined it would be.



St. Mary le Strand Church – London

Eventually I made it to Chancery Lane underground station. I took the Central Line east to Stratford, which was the site of the 2012 London Olympics. There I caught the Docklands Light Railway, an automated train system that I took years ago on the trip to London I made with Margaret. I rode the DLR south to Royal Victoria station, which was across the street from my next destination. That was the Thames Cable Car. Technically it's the IFS Cloud Car, and it's been through numerous "your name here" sponsorships over the years. Though operated by Transport for London, this is basically a tourist attraction (with a fare in the range of the most expensive tube rides). It takes passengers across the Thames in little gondolas, suspended from cables above the river. There's really no reason for the cable car as transportation, since both the tube and the DLR cross under the river nearby. It is a cool experience, though, and it provides a nice view of the river.

I rode the cable car over to North Greenwich, which is next to what used to be called the Millennium Dome. (Now it's the O2



Cable cars on the north shore of the Thames

Arena, named after a cell phone company.) Locals apparently call it “the pin cushion” because of the numerous weird metal supports that stick out from its fabric roof.

The North Greenwich tube station is directly under the dome, and I made my way there. Unfortunately when I tapped my visitor Oyster card the gate wouldn't open. I went over to a ticket machine and verified that it had sufficient money on it, and the machine confirmed it still had £33. I tried two other turnstiles, and it wouldn't work at either of them either. I went to a woman who was working and explained the problem to her. She had me first tap a turnstile to verify the card wasn't working and then go back over to the ticket machine to verify it was

valid. She then had me tap the card again, and again it didn't work. She acted as if the problem were my fault and implied that I was screwing up her turnstiles. Eventually she let me through, though. I worried about what would happen when I needed to exit, but then I remembered that I could just take the Elizabeth line back to Paddington and scan my BritRail pass to exit.

In retrospect, I think what happened was that I never tapped out of the DLR before taking the cable car. They don't actually have turnstiles on the DLR; instead there are little tap stands by the exits. A lot of light rail systems work that way, but I'd failed to tap out, so the system hadn't recorded a complete trip. What it should do is automatically charge the maximum fare, and I'd be fine if they did that. Instead it just froze up, though.

Because of the issue with the card I decided not to see the one other attraction I was planning to do today. It's hardly a major thing, just a sculpture built out of traffic lights that looks like an enormous tree. It's in the middle of a roundabout by another DLR station, and I figured it was better to just avoid it.

I took the Jubilee line back up to Stratford, and I knew there was a transfer there to the Elizabeth line that didn't involve faregates. I caught a train over to Paddington, where the Elizabeth line runs very deep underground. I went up an elevator to the mezzanine level where the faregate were. I found they didn't even have QR code readers there, but I did see employees at the side. I flashed my pass to one, and I was let off without any further issue with the Oyster card.

I went back to the Shakespeare Hotel, where a different employee seemed very suspicious when I claimed to have left a bag there. He saw the picture I'd taken, but neither he nor I could get it to zoom in so he could see what was written on those little wristbands. Eventually he just asked me what my bags looked like, and I identified and got them. Trust me, even if I return to London, I'll never store luggage at the Shakespeare Hotel again.

I went back to Paddington station and thought I'd use the restroom before boarding a train. However the toilets there are down a long flight of stairs. (There's apparently an accessible ladies room, but not a gents.) The need was not absolutely desperate, and I really didn't want to struggle with bags up and down what looked like at least thirty steps.

I again showed my pass to an employee at the Elizabeth line turnstiles and went through without a problem. Trains come quite frequently on the Elizabeth line, but the majority of the westbound trains go to Heathrow. Some also terminate at Paddington. I had to wait for the fourth train to get one going to Reading. It was crowded, but a woman graciously offered me her seat. In turn someone else who was leaving at the next stop offered her theirs.

Fortunately this was a semi-express train that skipped more than half the possible stops. It still seemed to take forever to get to my ultimate destination, Slough. While hotels in Paddington were charging many hundreds of pounds, in Slough (which has a rather nasty reputation) I could get a perfectly nice room for just £65.

It took quite a while to leave the station, mostly because I chose to use the “lifts” rather than the staircases. My BritRail pass worked fine at the exit. I called up Google Maps again and put in the Slough Travelodge. The route it directed me on is not one I'll be taking again. Basically I walked down a bunch of back alleys and past a homeless encampment. I'm sure it was the most direct route, but I'll go just a bit out of the way and follow the main road next time.

While I'm in one of their upgraded rooms, the Slough Travelodge is easily the worst of the hotels I've stayed at on this trip. It's definitely a step down from Premier Inn and basically comes across as a high-rise Motel 6. I do get a fancy coffee machine and upgraded internet, but those appear to be it for the perks of the “superroom”.

The biggest negative of the Travelodge turned out to mostly be a non-issue. Unlike every other hotel I'd been to on this trip, this one wasn't air conditioned. A week ago, when London was experiencing highs pushing 100 and lows in the upper 70s, that would have been a big problem. Today was a much more normal day for summer in England. The high was around 80 this afternoon, and the lows would be in the upper 50s overnight. The windows of the room were open when I arrived, and they had a fan going. That made it tolerable

when I arrived, and it actually got a bit chilly by morning. The only real problem was that with the windows open I could hear the noise of Friday night in Slough. Mostly that amounted to sirens, and they didn't keep me from sleeping.

Something I find very odd in Britain is that no one has screens on their windows. They do seem to be fewer bugs than we have in America, but it's not like there are none. I'm on the seventh floor (with a lovely view of Windsor Castle), and that does seem to be high enough that bugs aren't a problem. The lack of screens does make me wonder, though.

My dinner tonight was a salad I'd picked up at the Paddington station location of Pret a Manger. This is a British chain along the lines of Panera. They have them in Chicago, too, and in the Windy City people tend to pronounce it roughly as the French would "prett-ah-mahn-jay"—the name means "ready to eat" in French. In Britain the middle word is a schwa—"uh", and the final word is pronounced like the manger where Christ was born. I ate their Italian vegetarian salad with wooden cutlery in my room at the Travelodge, and it was pretty good. I also had some orange drink that I'd picked up at a gift shop in central London. This was a copy of Fanta called Miranda with a label only in some east European language I didn't understand. Oddly, it's apparently made by some country's subsidiary of Pepsi.

I spent most of the evening doing today's write-up. That was a bit harder than usual, since I kept absolutely no notes in Google Keep today. That meant I had to rely on my actual memory for what happened when. Fortunately it wasn't too complicated of a day.

I also watched a bit more TV. One show I came across was essentially the British version of *Forensic Files*, a show I frequently watch at home. I also came across a bizarre show that followed different people who were having plastic surgery. Pretty much all of them looked perfectly fine ahead of time, but of course that's not how they felt themselves.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 1

SOUTHEAST ENGLAND

When most people go to London they see things like the Tower, Buckingham Palace, and Big Ben. I saw none of those on this trip, largely because I had seen them on that trip with Margaret twenty years back. While there's a different occupant of the palace, I don't think much else has changed since then. Today I saw one place I'd been particularly looking forward to and another I decided to see on the spur of the moment.

I didn't set my alarm at all today, but I was still up shortly after six. Unsurprisingly the Travelodge had the worst shower of the different places I'd been to—minimal pressure and a constantly varying temperature.

After showering, shaving, brushing my teeth, and getting dressed, I headed out for the day. First I walked south about half a mile to a McDonalds, where I got an Egg McMuffin meal. (Technically it was a "bacon and egg McMuffin", since the "egg McMuffin" is a vegetarian item like the bagel I had on the train yesterday.) It was weird that there was absolutely nobody in the restaurant on a weekend morning, though the drive-through seemed to be doing a brisk business. Obviously it's not a place the old men of the area meet for coffee.

I walked up to Slough station. It's the other way from McDonalds, and it was right at a mile walking there. I did confirm that the main road was a much more pleasant walking route, and I also found the bus stop I'd need to use to get the quickest route to Heathrow from here.

I caught the 8:21 Elizabeth line service into the city. This time I went beyond Paddington and got off at Tottenham Court Road. (The first road is pronounced "TOT-num", with a glottal stop in the middle.) I transferred there to the Northern Line of the tube, and I was a bit worried that there were no barriers between the Elizabeth and Northern lines. However, when I exited I was delighted that the turnstile accepted my Oyster card without any problems. I think their system may have thought I'd been riding around since yesterday afternoon. One way or another, at least it was working correctly again.

The transfer to the main railway station at Euston isn't as convenient as it was at Paddington. Something I noticed on this transfer that had been true throughout this trip is that there are a large number of British people who use metal walking devices. They're not exactly crutches, more like double canes. I'd say the majority of senior citizens here use them, as do a surprising number of younger people. What you don't see many of are those motorized scooters old people use in the States. There's a few, but British sidewalks aren't generally equipped for them.

I did eventually find where I was supposed to go, though, and I was able to board another train run by the company named both West Midlands and London Northwest. This one was bound for Birmingham, though I'd only take it a few stops north.

We went through a long series of tunnels leaving Euston station and soon were in another area full of factories and warehouses. Watford Junction, our first stop, is just inside the M-25 orbital motorway (the London beltway), and beyond there rapidly got quite rural. I could tell from the fields how dry it's been in southeast England this summer. Almost everything looked yellow rather than green. They were definitely the driest crops I'd seen anywhere in Britain.

My destination was the village of Bletchley, which is about fifty miles from London. Technically Bletchley is part of the city of Milton Keynes, but the village existed since the 13th Century, while Milton Keynes is a “new town” that has only existed since 1967. It was one of many “satellite towns” designed to relieve population pressures on London. Except for what was already in the villages within the area, Milton Keynes was completely built as government housing—though most of those homes have since been sold to their residents.

The Bletchley area has been home to some famous people historically, among them the slave-trader John Newton who is better known for writing the hymn “Amazing Grace”. Mostly, though, Bletchley is known for its role in winning World War II. I was here to see Bletchley Park, the historic site where the world’s toughest military and diplomatic codes were cracked.

Bletchley Park is just down the road, across the street from the station. I was intrigued that the only other thing in the area is a car rental business that was doing a booming business this morning. I suppose a lot of Londoners take the train out of town and then rent a car for a road trip through the countryside. It would certainly be easier to start a trip in Bletchley than in central London.

Bletchley was chosen for the code-cracking operation partly because of its location. It’s easy to get to from London by train, but really more importantly it’s on the cross-England line, halfway between Oxford and Cambridge. The site of Bletchley Park was originally a country estate that went into receivership after World War I. Someone at the foreign office had the foresight to purchase the property for government use. Originally the estate’s mansion and its out-buildings were all that was used. About 200 people came to those buildings after receiving phone messages or telegrams stating “Auntie Flo is not so well.”

The complex rapidly outgrew its original buildings, and the government built eight large brick complexes they called “blocks” and rowhouses they called “huts”. By the time of the D-Day invasion 9,000 people with seventy job descriptions worked at Bletchley Park. The important scientists and military officers lived in the huts. Most of the other workers were young women. Some of them lived in apartments on the upper floors of the blocks, but the vast majority boarded with local people and commuted to Bletchley Park. Winston Churchill praised their work by calling them “a flock of geese that laid a golden egg—and never cackled”.



**Naval Enigma machine
(distinguishable by 4 wheels instead of 3)**

Russian, if they needed to go to other allies). They then assessed the importance of each decoded message. Motorcycle couriers (also mostly women) constantly brought in messages that had been intercepted and then took the decoded messages to the appropriate destinations.

I knew about what had gone on at Bletchley Park from books I’d read or listened to as audiobooks (various histories of World War II and a biography of Alan Turing). I learned a lot more about it on this visit, though, and it was fascinating to see where it happened and how it was done.

They have multiple museums at Bletchley Park, and I made my way through four of them. Unlike at some museums, I paused to watch many of the films they presented along the way. While I’d seen Enigma machines before, I’d never seen dozens of them all in

Everything at Bletchley Park was top secret, and it remained so until the 1970s. Most workers knew what their precise job was, but they were not made aware of how the jobs fit together or what problems were being solved. Everyone was sworn to secrecy and were not to discuss their work with each other, with those whom they boarded, nor anyone else.

The primary work done at Bletchley Park was decoding messages that the German military had encoded using their Enigma machines. These look like glorified typewriters, but they were wired to exchange each letter for another in a constantly changing order. There were literally trillions of possibilities for the code, which changed each day. The Germans, however, sent their coded messages using standard Morse code radio signals, which were easily intercepted. That, and the fact that there were some very standard messages (the day’s weather and “nothing to report”) that provided a starting place for cracking each day’s code. It also turned out to be important that no letter was ever coded as itself, but always a different letter.

Because there were so many possibilities, it was effectively impossible for a human to crack each day’s code before the day ended (or likely even within months). To solve the problem Alan Turing perfected a machine called the Bombe that eliminated every possible code that couldn’t work until only the correct code was left. Once the day’s code was known, groups of women who effectively worked as typists entered the coded words into a British version of the Enigma, and the original German words came out (though only as letters, with no spaces between the words). Women who were literate in German isolated the words and then translated the messages into English (or in some cases French or

the same place. I'd also never seen the Bombe that did the actual work of figuring out how to decode messages. It was also interesting to see what life was like for those who worked here. It seemed a lot like Los Alamos, where the atomic bomb was developed.



LEFT: Block at Bletchley Park, with extremely dry lawn
RIGHT: Statue of Alan Turing



I took a free guided tour of the Bletchley Park grounds, which turned out to be the most disappointing part of the visit. The volunteer guide was an elderly man who liked to ramble on with stories. While I can generally move all right with my knees, standing in one place for an extended time gets very painful indeed. Most of this tour involved standing and listening to the man's stories. Only one of the places we stopped had a bench where I could sit while I listened, so my knees (and really more my calves) were aching badly by the end of the tour. I also didn't really learn much of anything new on the tour; most of what the man said had already been presented in the various museum movies.

After the tour I stopped at a little ice cream stand on the Bletchley Park grounds. The seller would only take card sales, though, so she lost my sale.

I went into one more museum, where they looked at what happened at Bletchley after D-Day. They actually used many of the same techniques to decode Japanese messages for the American forces. While the Japanese language is nothing at all like German, the Japanese sent their messages using the Roman alphabet, and they used German Enigma machines to encode it. After the war they continued to work on codebreaking mostly as part of the cold war. British intelligence moved their codebreaking service to a different location in the 1960s, and in the late '70s they began to publicly acknowledge what had gone on at Bletchley. The final museum also had exhibits on how codebreaking continues to be used to solve crimes and also how artificial intelligence (which arguably the Bombe was an early form of) has evolved over time.

I spent about three and a half hours at Bletchley Park, and I really could have spent all day without getting bored. I found it truly fascinating, and if anyone reading this happens to find themselves in London, I'd definitely recommend Bletchley as a side-trip.

While I was at Bletchley Park I checked in online for the flight to Belfast I'll be taking tomorrow. I'm flying with British Airways, and their check-in process for a domestic flight seemed more complicated than checking in for an international flight on United was. At least I got it done, though.

I'd taken a fast train up to Bletchley, but the first London-bound train was one that stopped at every station. I wondered if the next train (which left fifteen minutes later) might have gotten to Euston before we did. It took right at an hour before we finally made it to London, while the trip up had taken about half that time.

On a whim, I'd thought of one other thing I wanted to see in London. I'd googled it on my computer last night and wrote very specific directions on my phone, taking advantage of the fact that Google Maps on computers shows every business, which stupidly don't show up on the phone version. I took the train to Oxford Circus, exited to the east (in the direction of the downtown London IKEA) and walked east until I got to the corner where the flagship store of Marks & Spencer, an UnderArmour store, and an NBA store are located on the same corner. I turned right there onto Poland Avenue (which surprisingly did have a sign above the UnderArmour store) and went south until that street ended. Just to the left of that corner was my destination. The directions worked perfectly, and in spite of ridiculous crowds on Oxford Street (London's biggest shopping street), I made it there quickly.



Replica well in front of John Snow pub – London

a chain called Leon, another place that's a lot like Panera that had a location across from the pub. You have to order through a kiosk there. My credit card was actually approved, but it said it required a signature, and neither the kiosk nor the counter had any way of doing that. I also tried a Greek restaurant, but they seemed to be out of everything that seemed appealing to me.

I made one other stop on my way back to Oxford Circus. That was at a Boots pharmacy. What I really wanted was some cotton swabs (like Q-Tips). I scoured the store but couldn't find them anywhere. Walgreens usually has these in multiple places (baby care, make-up, and ear care), but they weren't in any of those places at Boots. I did buy some packaged fresh fruit that would be my main dinner back at the hotel. The drugstore was nearly as jammed as Oxford Street itself, and it was honestly kind of a chore to shop there.

I was pleased that the Oyster card still worked fine, and I caught a train up to Paddington station. When I checked the Elizabeth line departures, though, they didn't have a single train headed to Reading listed in the next hour and a half. I don't know if there was some construction happening on the weekend or not, but nothing on their board would take me to Slough. I looked through all the rest of the trains and found a single Great Western Railway service that would go to Slough, leaving in about twenty minutes. I filled most of that time having a very late lunch at a Burger King in the station. Instead of fries I chose a side salad, which I'd have with the fruit for dinner tonight.

The train left Paddington at 4:38pm. This train ran express to slough, getting there in about twenty minutes. I scanned my BritRail pass one last time to leave the station and then made my way back to the hotel.

My knees were hurting badly, so the first thing I did at the hotel was to spend some time with the TENS machine. That helped a lot; I honestly wish there was a version I could use while walking around. Then I had dinner and I got caught up on this.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 2

SLOUGH, ENGLAND TO BANGOR, NORTHERN IRELAND

I was up slightly before six this morning, and I checked out of the hotel right at 7am. I was amazed at how many people were out that early on a Sunday, but the street was nearly as busy as it had been on Saturday. I soon made it up to Slough's main bus interchange at Wellington Street and Windsor Road. I had nearly twenty minutes until my bus would leave, so I settled in for a long wait on a bench. Almost everyone else there was a foreign-born service worker. It was a bit surprising to hear people speaking to each other in Spanish, but these days the U.K. (and the London area in particular) gets a lot of immigrants from Latin America and the Philippines. At one point a very drunk homeless man tried to bother me, but when I ignored him, he moved on.

Bus 703 showed up about five minutes early. I had downloaded the Thames Valley bus app and bought a £3 single ride ticket. While it took a minute for the farebox to register that it was valid, it eventually did, and I took a seat. Pretty much everyone else had smart cards (presumably with monthly passes) that they tapped to pay their fare.

While a handful of people got on and off along the way, the vast majority went all the way to Heathrow Terminal 5. Most appeared to be airport or airline workers of various types, the same sort of people you see on the blue line 'L' in Chicago. There were several others with luggage, though, and it is a quick and efficient way to get from London's western suburbs to the airport. If my train pass had still

The corner building I was headed for is now a pub called the John Snow, which honors a man I discuss in my Statistics classes. Snow used Statistics to prove that cholera is a waterborne illness. In particular he showed that water people in the area had drawn from a public pump had been polluted, which caused the disease. It was later shown that people would do their duty overnight and dump the chamberpots into open sewers that emptied into the stream that fed the pump. They would then draw water from the pump, which effectively meant they were drinking human waste.

Snow did his work by gathering and analyzing data, which is precisely what Statistics is. He literally took a map and made marks where every case of cholera had been. The pattern showed that it was primarily concentrated in the area that drew their water from what was then known as the Broad Street well. (Today the street is called Broadwick.) The handle was ordered removed from the well, and the cholera stopped spreading.

There is a blue plaque on the John Snow pub, which at the time cholera hit London was a residential building. They also have a replica handleless pump in front of the building. I thought about having lunch at the pub, but nothing on their menu (quite classically British) really appealed to me. I did attempt to have a late lunch at

been active, I could have taken the Elizabeth line into the city and then back out to Heathrow. That would have taken about twice as long as the bus, though, and without the pass it would also have been more expensive.

The ride to the airport took about twenty minutes. When we reached a roundabout just before the airport grounds, there were big signs warning there was a £7 fee for dropping off at the terminals. I did a bit of research and found that this applies to every vehicle, including the bus—though they would have taken in over a hundred pounds from the passengers this morning, so seven would be basically nothing. It also applies to taxis, which automatically add the fee to their fare. What makes Heathrow unusual compared to any other airport I've been to is that the fee also applies to personal vehicles. Basically they're trying to prevent people from driving to the airport. There's apparently a lot of park-and-fly lots nearby that have shuttles, and of course trains arrive frequent to stations beneath the terminals. It does seem weird to charge cars for just being there, though.

It took a minute to get oriented, but eventually I made my way up to the departures hall at Terminal 5. This terminal has huge signage with British Airways logos and the wording "Welcome to our home!" I honestly wouldn't be that proud of the place if I were British Airways. Terminal 5 is cramped, confusing, and horribly overcrowded. It makes O'Hare seem like tidy and organized.

I was greeted by a massive line for check-in and baggage check. At most airports these days you do this through kiosks. They had a handful of those, but each of them had its own long line. The main line was for a bank of eighteen human agents. While it still took a full half hour to get to the front, I'm pretty sure that was faster than waiting for the kiosks would have been.

Security, on the other hand, was among the quickest I've ever experienced at a major airport. I was travelling in "Club Europe" (BA's name for business class) today, mostly because it was only a few bucks (five I think) more than it would have cost to check a bag. In addition to getting two free checked bags, Club Europe also provided fast-track security, and they definitely meant it here. From the front of the line to the end took about five minutes. The support sleeves on my knees set off an alarm, though I'd purposely worn shorts so they could tell what it was likely to be. At Heathrow they actually had a special machine for precisely this issue. I put one leg at a time into that machine. I don't know if it was an x-ray or an explosives checker or what, but both legs came up green, and I was on my way.



Crowd at Heathrow Terminal 5

Club Europe also provides free lounge access, unlike domestic first class in the United States. The British Airlines lounge was just beyond security, and of course I went in. So did literally thousands of other people. The crowds here made me wonder just how full those lounges in Chicago that weren't accepting customers must have been. I had breakfast in the lounge—the same sliced ham and cheese I'd had at the Copthorne Hotel in Plymouth, plus a raisin pastry, a croissant, a delicious citrus salad, and a triangular hash brown. (Tri-taters—usually baked rather than fried—seem to be a breakfast staple throughout Britain.) I used the lounge's free wi-fi to do a survey about one of the hotels I'd stayed at, and I also thumbed through *High Life*, British Airways' inflight magazine, which surprised me by still being available in print.

All the toilets in the lounge are individual unisex cubicles, and there was a long line to access them. I was surprised by how clean they were given the crowd, though.

Something rather annoying about Heathrow is that they don't announce the gates from flights will leave until 45 minutes prior to departure. I suspect they want to keep people waiting in their snooty central shopping area rather than by individual gates. I attempted to use a money converting machine, since I'd be in the Republic of Ireland (where euros are the standard) tomorrow. The machine was extremely confusing, and eventually I gave up. That was probably for the best, since the rate of exchange was horrible. They would have paid out slightly fewer euros than the pounds I put in, when the pound is actually worth more than the euro—€1.17, in fact.

When I'd given up on the exchange ATM they finally posted the gate. I fought my way through a crowd that was mostly moving the opposite direction and eventually found that Gate A-17 was hidden behind a Christian Dior shop. It surprised me when they started boarding literally the moment I arrived.

We went down and down and down to get to the plane. First we went down a long escalator, and then we went on a steeply sloping jetway. There was a bit of a wait to actually board, because two people in wheelchairs were being seated. As we waited, I noticed that most of the planes at nearby gates were for Iberia Airlines. That makes some sense, since the same company owns both British Airways and Iberia. (They also own Aer Lingus in Ireland.) Spain is by far the most popular vacation destination for Brits, so the partnership does seem reasonable.

Eventually I found my way to 3-F, though. Club Europe seating is quite different than an American first class product. In the States it's all about the seat, and a big "recliner" seat is the standard at the front of the plane on short distance flights. In Club Europe (and apparently pretty much all European first class) the actual seat is no different than what you'd get in economy. It's narrow and has the minimum possible space between rows. What makes it different, though, is that they completely block off the middle seat in a 3—3 configuration. There's a table fixed between the armrests, so that middle seat can't be used at all. On a short flight the narrow seat is tolerable if nobody's sitting next to you, so it works fine.

The plane was an Airbus A-320. It was brand new but had almost no special amenities. There was no wifi, for instance, nor any entertainment screens. On the other hand, this was only about an hour flight, and I knew it wouldn't be hard to entertain myself by looking out the window.

We completed boarding about fifteen minutes ahead of our 11:00 departure. However, the pilot told us we'd have to wait at the gate until our assigned time to "join the queue". Once we were in line on the taxiway, it was another fifteen minutes before we were finally in the air.

It amazes me how self-important some people are and how they seem to think the rules don't apply to them. This is certainly no different in Britain than it is back home. While the flight attendants were preparing for the safety demonstration, multiple people got up to get things out of their luggage, and one even went to use the restroom. When the attendant attempted to stop him, the guy just grunted and went into the toilet anyway.

British Airways charges economy customers for every snack or drink; you don't even get pretzels and pop for free in economy. Food and drink are included for Club Europe, though, which was another reason it was worth it when the price was essentially the same as the checked bag fee. Today we were served what they called a "light lunch". There were supposed to be multiple choices. However, they served from the ends of first class to the middle, and Row 3 ended up being served last. By the time they got to me the only option left was a salad with eggs and prawns. I'm allergic to shellfish, so I left the prawns uneaten. The bits of boiled egg were tasty, as was the lettuce, a few cut-up beans, and the green goddess dressing. The meal was served with a crusty roll and a coffee-flavored mousse. Both alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks were free. I'd hoped to have some British cider, which I'd suspect was similar to the hard cider I had in New Zealand. They were out of that, though, so I just had a Diet Coke.

I could tell how dry southern England was from the air. Apparently they've been in severe drought all summer, to the point that water restrictions are in place throughout the south. Things looked greener as we made our way northwest, presumably flying over Wales (though with no screen map, I'm only guessing at that).

We flew over an enormous wind farm right before we came to the Irish Sea. The turbines seemed to go on forever. It reminded me of the area along U.S. 65 south of Clarion—except that there's no coast nearby in Iowa.



Landscape of Northern Ireland

There is a suburban train station fairly close to Belfast City Airport. Google Maps said I could walk there in about fifteen minutes. When I tried following their directions, though, it led me to a gated car park. I went back inside the terminal and eventually asked a person at the disability services desk how to get to the train station. He said there was a free shuttle that would take me there and that I should call for it using a button at the bus stop. Oddly the airport's own website doesn't mention the shuttle, though they do talk about the train station being "nearby".

The shuttle came in just a couple minutes. I was certainly glad it existed, because it would have been impossible to walk to the station. I think they're doing some sort of construction, which is blocking the walking path Google was trying to take me on. At any rate, it was about a five-minute drive, and we did go straight through that parking lot.

Sydenham (pronounced "SID-num") station is located across a motorway from the airport. The shuttle let me off at the motorway's airport exit. From there I had to go up a long flight of outdoor stairs, cross a walkway over the motorway, and then choose which of two other long flights of stairs I should go down to get to the correct platform. The platforms aren't labeled from the skywalk, but I assumed correctly that the eastbound platform would be the first one I'd come to heading south.

We began our descent at 11:45, just half an hour after we'd taken off. We flew over the channel that separates Scotland and Northern Ireland and soon were flying over the harbor east of Belfast. From the air, Ireland looked much, much greener than England had. They'd obviously gotten more recent rain, and of course it is the "emerald isle".

We landed at Belfast City Airport (right on the harbor east of the city) at 12:06pm, nearly twenty minutes before we were scheduled to arrive. This is a small airport. It seems similar in size to Des Moines Airport, but the seem to have less traffic in Belfast. We quickly pulled up to the only gate in the airport that had a jetway. The jetway led to stairs (without even an escalator option) that took me down to the basement of the airport.

My bags came fairly quickly, and I was intrigued that they had a sniffer dog at the exit to baggage claim. I don't know if he was looking for drugs, agricultural products, or what, but fortunately my bags didn't bring any reaction.

My next challenge was getting transportation to my destination.

I had no clue what the train schedule was on Sunday, but it turned out I couldn't have timed things better. Just as I finished dragging my bags down to the platform, an eastbound train pulled up. It was only after boarding that I bought a ticket through the Translink—NI app. Fortunately the conductor didn't check until a couple stops down the line.

The train was quite crowded, mostly with families and elderly people. They were a talkative bunch, and I must say that of all the accents I've heard on this trip, the Northern Irish dialect is the hardest to understand. (Scots would be a close second.) Not only do they swallow their words, but they have a weird lilting, sing-songy delivery. Even the recorded voice on the train kept changing pitch up and down.

This train hugs the coast on the south side of the harbor for most of its route. It was a lovely trip, and one I'll do at least five more times over the next few days. I rode to the end of the line at Bangor. Like the same-named city in Maine, this Bangor seems to be pronounced differently by different people. The difference is whether or not the "g" is pronounced. Some say "BANG-er" (like a gang banger), while others say "BAN-gur", like they want to put an end to growling. The "a" is always a short vowel sound, and final "r" isn't really pronounced in either version.

I was staying at my fifth Premier Inn of the trip. The one I picked (mostly because it was much cheaper than anything in Belfast proper) looks like an American-style motel. It could easily be a Comfort Inn, for instance. It's located across a major highway from Bangor station. They understandably don't let you cross the highway just anywhere. I had to walk north (downhill) a block and a half past a big roundabout, cross the street, and then walk the same block and a half uphill to get to the hotel—not quite as straight-forward as it looked on the map. I did make it there without a problem, though, and I checked in right at 1:30pm.

Something that I haven't mentioned yet that intrigued me about Premier Inns is that they use robotic vacuum cleaners to (as the British would say) "hoover" the rooms. A hotel would actually be the perfect place to use those, since there are a limited number of room layouts, and presumably the robot could master them easily. The Premier Inn rooms did generally seem clean, though the same can't necessarily be said of Travelodge.

I rested for a while at the hotel and then went out to do a bit of exploring. The main place I went was Asda, Britain's biggest discount chain. While it was founded a century ago under the name Associated Dairies, for years Asda was fully owned by Wal-Mart. The Arkansas chain divested their European interests a couple years ago, but Asda still looks and feels like a Wal-Mart—albeit with a green color scheme instead of blue. They even have those electric scooter carts that fat people use. The Bangor Asda is kind of weird because it's like a mix of urban and suburban. It faces a huge parking lot with a gas station on one side and the town's high street on the other.

I spent a full half hour browsing through Asda. I actually managed to locate cotton swabs (sold in the baby department under the name Little Angel buds). They were a true bargain at 200 for 54p (about 75¢). I also bought some snacks (including Tayto, a brand of crisps that advertises "the natural taste of the Ulster countryside" and Tunnock's tea cakes (similar to Hostess cupcakes, but made by a Scottish "family company since 1890"). I got a weirdly shaped Pepsi bottle to add to my collection as well as two liters of Asda brand "diet tropical crush", a tasty sour drink that lists pineapple and grapefruit among its ingredients.

Pretty much everything at Asda was cheaper than equivalent products I'd seen elsewhere in the U.K. An example I didn't buy was Lynx deodorant (the name that Axe goes by in Britain—and also New Zealand). A can at Boots cost £5.99 (just over \$8), which is more than it would cost at Hy-Vee or Target. Asda had the same cans at 2 for £5, less than half the price they wanted at Boots. The brand name Pepsi cost £2.14 (\$2.89) for two liters, while most places a single-serve bottle costs about three pounds. The generic pop was even cheaper, just 84p (\$1.15) for two liters. Almost everything at Asda seemed to cost about what it would at Wal-Mart (sometimes even less—particularly on things like meat and produce), and most things were significantly cheaper than at other British stores. The most expensive thing I bought was a dress shirt that cost £12 (just over \$16). I've seen similar things for as much as £39 (\$52.50) elsewhere.

Bangor's high street is lined with beautiful baskets of flowers. Aside from Asda, though, there's not a lot of places to shop. The high street has several second-hand shops run by charities, multiple Indian restaurants (by far the most popular cuisine in the U.K.), lots of professional offices, and three grand-looking churches (Catholic, Anglican, and Presbyterian). There's not much of anything else, though. Perhaps Asda is also like Wal-Mart in driving away the local competition.

I chose to have dinner tonight at the hotel restaurant (called Thyme, one of several brands Whitbread owns). I wanted something more than fast food, and I knew it would be easy to be a table for one at the hotel. When I went down there at 7pm I was actually the only person in the restaurant, though four or five more tables were filled before I left.

They actually only offered a limited menu at the restaurant tonight, supposedly due to staff training. It was basically a "prix fixe" menu that could either include a starter and main or a main and dessert for £16. (While that's roughly \$21.50, it's important to note that tipping is not customary in the U.K. and tax is already included, so that is the final price.)

I chose the main and dessert, and I'm glad I did. Many times British menus price everything a la carte, so there's no sides included. However the large portion of lasagna I had came with a garlic and herb flatbread and a nice salad that included mixed greens, red onion, red pepper, corn, and yellow tomatoes with a balsamic vinaigrette. There was certainly no need for a starter on top of that.

The dessert I chose was Eton mess, which is named after the elite boarding school. In the Southern Hemisphere they'd call it a deconstructed pavlova. It had crumbles of meringue and assorted tart berries together with both ice cream and whipped cream. There was a little mint sprig on top for good measure. It was quite tasty and not overly sweet. The whole meal was nice and seemed well worth its price.

I spent most of the evening at my computer. In addition to getting this caught up, I worked on a couple of updates for the school website, honoring athletes who had recently participated in post-season honorary events. Interestingly our football and baseball coaches were also coaching these events, so they were big honors all around for the school.

MONDAY, **A**UGUST 3 BANGOR, NORTHERN IRELAND, & DUBLIN, IRELAND, VIA BELFAST

I'd set my alarm for 5:45 this morning. I slept soundly until then and was honestly rather groggy after it did go off. After showering and dressing I managed to find a somewhat more direct route to the station, cutting through the park-and-ride lot. I'm not sure that's what people are supposed to do, but I'm quite certain I'm not the first to do it.

I got to the station shortly after 6:30 to make sure I was in time for a train that would be leaving at 6:51. Oddly, the signs at the station said there was a 6:41 train, but not one at 6:51. All the regular passengers were confused by that, and eventually an employee in the station said, "No, it's 6:51—they set all those signs centrally, and someone flubbed it."

I was surprised that unlike the train I'd taken yesterday, this one ran mostly express. We skipped about six stations and didn't really stop until we were right on the outskirts of Belfast. The train had sped along until that point, but once we got to the city it slowed way down as we kept going through various track switches. We still got into Belfast's Grand Central Station at about 7:25.



**Empty first class carriage on the Enterprise train
Belfast, Northern Ireland**

stop, Portadown, but that was it. The standard class cars looked about a fourth full.

This was probably the nicest first-class seat I'd had on any train in the U.K. It was another 1—2 configuration, and I was on the single side. What made it nicer than the other trains I'd been on, though, was that the table in front of the seat was attached to the wall of the car rather than having a leg mounted to the floor. That made for much better legroom and a much more comfortable ride. The table was perfectly stable in its cantilevered position, and I really don't know why other British trains block space with a leg.

Food is not included with the price on the Enterprise, but they do provide cooked meals to first-class passengers at additional cost. This morning I paid £9.50 in coins for a cheese and tomato omelet. The tomatoes seemed an odd addition to me, but they weren't bad. The dish came with toasted Irish soda bread (which basically was just toast), butter and jam, and a personal pot of French-press coffee. The complete meal wasn't bad value for £9.50—particularly with no tax or tip to worry about. It was also nice to be able to get rid of a sizeable amount of high-value coins.

Since my rail pass had expired, I had to buy separate tickets for my adventures today. I'd mostly be riding on the Enterprise train, a service that shuttles between Belfast and Dublin roughly every hour. The service is jointly operated by Translink in Northern Ireland and Irish Rails in the Republic of Ireland. I couldn't actually buy a round-trip ticket, since they make you buy a ticket from the operator in the country begins. Oddly the ticket to Dublin cost £48, while the return trip cost €29.50. That meant Translink charged almost exactly double what Irish Rail did for the same journey. Obviously there's a bigger subsidy in the Republic of Ireland than in the U.K.

I'd bought my tickets online about a month ago, but I needed to pick up physical tickets before taking the trip. I was surprised that collection took almost no time at all. I typed the confirmation code into a vending machine, and it just spit out a ticket (which for Translink is a piece of receipt paper with a QR code). Since I had a bit more time than I'd expected, I stopped at Pret a Manger to get an almond croissant and an americano. I nursed those for a few minutes and then scanned the QR code to make my way to the platform.

The 8am train was very empty. I'd bought a first-class ticket, and when we left Belfast I was the only person seated in the entire first-class car. A couple of others joined at the first

At 9:03 we officially entered the Republic of Ireland—not that you’d know it at all. There is a sign on the parallel highway, but nothing at all on the railroad. There’s also no customs or immigration. This was part of the Good Friday agreement that ended Ireland’s infamous “troubles”. Prior to that there had been military checkpoints in both directions, and trains would stop there for up to an hour while officers grilled passengers on the purpose of their travel.

The Irish—U.K. border was one of numerous issues posed by Brexit, since Ireland is in the European Union, but the U.K. no longer is. The Brexit agreement included language that guaranteed the border would remain open, though. It’s helpful that while Ireland is in the E.U., they are not part of the Schengen economic zone, which means people have to go through customs to enter another European country after leaving Ireland. If Ireland were a Schengen country, I’d technically have entered illegally, since I didn’t have the electronic advanced clearance now required for countries in that zone. As it was, since I was in the U.K. legally, I could also visit Ireland legally.

The border is a point of contention with ultra-conservatives in Great Britain. The E.U. grants citizens of all its member countries the right to live in any other. (This was actually one of the issues that caused some more prejudiced British people to support Brexit.) Some believe that people from poor East European countries (the one they all complain about is Poland) will legally come to Ireland and then cross the border to Northern Ireland. From there they can take a domestic flight or ferry to anywhere else in the United Kingdom. They can complain all they want, but it’s not going to change any time soon.

Another interesting fact is that people born in Northern Ireland can automatically claim dual citizenship. I knew that from a gymnast I’ve followed, Olympic pommel horse champion Rhys McClenaghan. He lives just south of Bangor and has joint U.K. and Irish citizenship. He competed for Ireland in the Olympics and for Northern Ireland in the Commonwealth Games. Later on this trip a tour guide would explain that many people from Northern Ireland carry both passports and use whichever one is likely to work better for visiting their destination (which these days is more often the Irish (or E.U.) passport.

The biggest difference I noticed after we crossed the border was that the station signs and road signs on parallel roads were all bilingual in the Republic of Ireland. The Irish government has made a big push in support of the Irish language (mostly just called Irish today, though traditionally known as Gaelic). My sense was that there’s a pretty small number of people in Ireland who speak Irish natively. Kids are required to study it in school, though, just like English-speaking kids in Canada have to study French. They also make a point of putting Irish first on all the signs—and often in bigger lettering. I could tell this train had originated in Northern Ireland, because there was no Irish signage or announcements.

Otherwise I mostly saw farmland and small owns as we made our way southward. Most of the fields looked identical on both sides of the border—lots of grazing land (mostly for sheep and goats) and tiny areas (almost more like gardens than fields) allotted to various crops. A number of the fields in the Republic of Ireland had been covered with white fabric. They do something similar on the megafarms in California. The fabric contains fertilizer and slowly dissolves as the crops grow and are fed by it. I suspect it may also protect the young crops from being eaten by roaming livestock.



Coast north of Dublin at low tide

including shipping to North America—much cheaper than the Oyster card I’d gotten for London.

For the last half hour or so we ran right next to the coast, sometimes beside marshland and other times by beautiful beaches. Then we reached the warehouses and council houses that make up Dublin’s northern suburbs.

We got into Dublin’s Connolly station (which I’d find out later was named for the primary hero of Irish independence) around 10:15am. I paused briefly to pick up my return ticket, which Irish Rail prints on card stock with a magnetic stripe on it. Then I made my way about two block south to the Bursáras stop of Dublin’s Luas tram system. (Luas is pronounced like St. Louis; I have no idea what the origin of the name is.) Earlier this summer I’d bought a “Leap” card with a day pass that let me use pretty much any form of transit in the city of Dublin. The day pass cost €8,

The tram was very crowded but I did manage to get a seat. It had the destination “Red Cow” (which is something completely unpronounceable in Irish). I rode seven stops west to James’ stop (Séamas in Irish), named after a street which is in turn named after the neighborhood church. I had a pretty straight-forward fifteen-minute walk from there to my first destination of the day, the Guinness Storehouse.

I’ve done a number of brewery tours over the years—at big companies like Anheuser—Busch and Miller and at small craft breweries. I have to say the Guinness Storehouse was not at all my favorite. While the place I visited was the original brewery, today it’s

basically just a museum. I didn't see anything of the modern beer-making process. First I had a long, long wait in a slow-moving tape maze, during which my legs started aching again. (Again, standing still hurts them much more than walking.)

Once we finally got into the main part of the museum, a woman gave us a lengthy safety speech (again requiring a long period of standing) before sending us on our way. We next saw a film that introduced the four main ingredients in beer—barley, yeast, hops, and water. Almost every brewer will tell you they use only the finest ingredients, but of course they all buy the cheapest ingredients and use the local city water. What they didn't really do here was explain what the point of each ingredient is. A couple of the tours I've done (notably the Gull Brewery in Iceland and a small craft brewer in Milwaukee) did a nice job of explaining the ingredients; Guinness, though, basically just mentioned what they were.

There was a whole floor that explained the brewing process. This was done with historical equipment and a couple of animated films, though. Again, we saw nothing at all that showed how they brew beer in the 21st Century. They've been brewing beer in Dublin since 1759. I'm sure the basic idea of what they do is the same today as it was then, but it would be interesting to see how the actual equipment has changed.

My favorite part of the museum was a floor where they looked at advertising Guinness has used over the years. While I was not familiar with most of it, the ads they had (both print and television) all showed humor and great creativity.

I was reminded during the tour of another thing I always mention in my Statistics classes. An employee of Guinness named William Sealey Gossett was tasked with maintaining quality control at the brewery while destroying as little of the product as possible. He came up with what is known as the t-test, which today is one of the most commonly used statistical tests there is. The information in the museum actually skipped a key detail. Guinness refused to let him publish his work under his own name, claiming that the company should own the intellectual property. He had a falling out with the company and to keep them from profiting from the t-test, he published his work under the pseudonym "Student".



The harp (a symbol of Ireland) that appears on Guinness packaging

It's not really unsurprising that the "tour" (or rather walk through the museum) ends at a bar. What they call the Gravity Bar is a glass dome added onto the rooftop of their historic building. It's very crowded, but it did provide some nice view of the city. I've never been a great fan of Guinness. They also make a lager at a nearby factory, so that's what I chose to have as my free sample. I'm pretty sure that for me that was a better choice than a beer I could eat.

The exit was to a different street than the one where I entered, and I got quite disoriented trying to find my way back to a main street. I wasn't sure if my phone would work in Ireland or not. Technically my British SIM card was roaming, but what that meant was that Vodafone subtracted five times the data I actually used in Dublin. I'd used less than one-tenth of the data the card came with, though, so that really didn't matter. Google Maps was annoying, but it did eventually get me back to St. James' Street.

The American in me came through when I went to the wrong side of the street to catch an eastbound bus. I just missed bus #23, but fortunately the next one was only about a 10-minute wait. It was very crowded and moved even slower than the tram had. Eventually I made my way over to College Green, though.



**Old Library
Trinity College – Dublin**

College Green is the western entrance to Trinity College, a prestigious institution that was founded by Queen Elizabeth I in the year 1592. It is probably best known for its literary alumni—among them Bram Stoker, Oscar Wilde, Samuel Beckett, and Johnathan Swift. The campus feels a lot like Harvard, though everything at Trinity is stone rather than brick. I tried to imagine what it must be like to actually be a student there, particularly as the place is one of the biggest tourist attractions in Ireland.

The biggest reason people visit Trinity College is for its historic library, which is spectacularly beautiful and also houses original volumes of countless old books. The library also houses the *Book of Kells*, a spectacular collection of the gospels (from the Latin *Vulgate*) in illuminated calligraphy. It's easily one of the most beautiful books ever produced. The *St. John's Bible* that was produced by monks in Minnesota a few years back is a modern work based on the same concept. The *Book of Kells* was created in a monastery in Scotland in the early 9th Century and spent centuries at an abbey north of Dublin. When Catholic churches came under attack the book was donated to Trinity College. Today it is considered public property of the people of Ireland, but Trinity still maintains it.

They have a museum that explains the book, and on any given day they put exactly two pages from it on public display. The August 3 pages were not among the most impressive. They had nice calligraphy and a few colored flourishes. There was no real illustration, though. It was still cool to see, though.

I'd have liked to go to the National Museum of Archeology, which is also on the Trinity campus. The feature exhibit there are mummified bodies of Iron Age people that were preserved in the peat. Unfortunately that museum is closed for major repairs and renovation throughout 2026.

My next stop in Dublin was lunch. I happened by a place called Eddie Rocket's City Diner. The similarity of the name to Johnny Rocket's likely tells you this is one of those fake diners from the '50s that are mostly found in upscale malls. This was just on a commercial street, though, a block away from the Irish parliament and sandwiched between a Burger King and a McDonalds. It's apparently part of an Irish chain with dozens of locations all over the Republic. They make a point of saying that all their food (which of course consists mostly of meat, potatoes, and dairy) is from Ireland. I doubt the concept of a diner even existed in 1950s Ireland, but Eddie Rocket's still made a fun place to have lunch. I had their fancy cheeseburger and an enormous bowl of fries. I also had a tiny cup of Sprite Zero with a single cube of ice in it. The fries were actually served in a china bowl, and it was the amount Five Guys gives you—enough to feed a whole family. It intrigued me that much of the music they played was from the '60s and '70s rather than the '50s. That's nostalgic for me, though. I was delighted that my credit card worked without a hitch, since with my debit card expired, I had no way of getting euros to spend in Ireland.

I stopped at an enormous gift shop near Eddie Rocket's. My brother Steve has a co-worker with Irish ancestry who wanted to get something Irish to give his kid. Steve had given me twenty bucks to spend on that. He had suggested a leprechaun, but those were nowhere to be found. (I'd actually checked a couple of smaller gift shops, and they were also leprechaun-free.) I ended up with a bunch of small stuff that added up to about €20 (a little over \$20). I got a plush toy of a sheep with a shamrock scarf, an Irish flag, and a couple of wood carvings with Celtic designs. Hopefully at least some of it is appropriate.

I caught another jam-packed tram and headed west to Museum station, which is located down a long staircase or a block-long ramp from the main building of the National Museum of Ireland, the Collins Barracks. This is not a bad museum, and I certainly can't complain about anything that's free. (The Guinness Storehouse and the Book of Kells were both very pricey.) The place is enormous, though, and my legs were aching badly at this point. I saw everything, but it was a bit of a chore to do so.

Being in a barracks, it's no surprise that they have a lot of military history. Part of this focuses on the struggle for independence from the British Empire, and part deals with Ireland's participation in international wars—notably World War I and recent U.N. peacekeeping actions. Military history just isn't my thing, so I went through all of that quickly.

A large part of the museum also looks at Irish art, literature, music, and design. They look at Celtic artwork similar to the *Book of Kells* and writing from the Victorian era. Most of this part centers on modern design, though. They had a ton of modern furniture in the museum, and it all looked very Scandinavian. Ireland is apparently also big in clothing design.

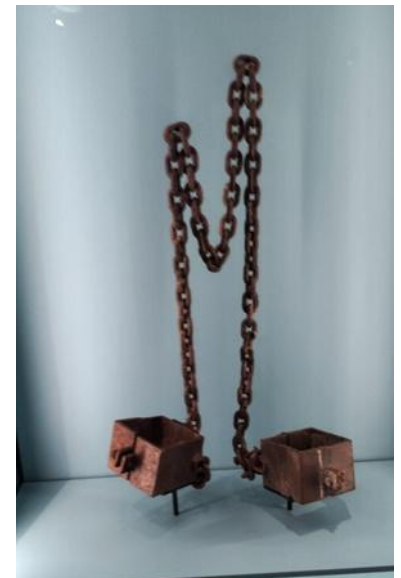
The most interesting part of the museum dealt with daily life in Ireland over the years, from prehistoric times (like when the bog people died) through about the 1970s. Until quite recently Ireland was one of the poorest countries in Europe, and it was also a hyper-religious country. Today religion seems to have more importance than it does in the U.K., but less than in America. Ireland today is also a very wealthy nation, one of the richest in the E.U. and on par with Germany and the Netherlands. Most of the money comes from tech-related jobs and pharmaceuticals. It seems to have trickled down better than it has back home, though, and most Irish people today lead a life their ancestors could only have dreamt of.

I got on another incredibly packed Luas tram and headed back to Connolly station. I found a quiet area above the main concourse and rested there a bit, enjoying some pop and an ice cream bar. Then I made my way through the faregates. They have a separate waiting room for Enterprise passengers in Dublin, and I spent a bit more time there. It was particularly amusing to watch a couple of birds fly all around the theoretically indoor room and perch on little shelves near the top.

The northbound train was much more crowded than the one I'd taken south. This left at 5:50pm, which would be a convenient return time for people regardless of when they'd arrived in the city. It was also set up differently. All of first class was at tables that could seat four. While there were several solo travelers, I lucked out in having an entire table to myself—I think the only one in the car that didn't have at least two people at it. The main negative was that the lighting was from lamps that were fixed in place and blocked part of the table and part of the view out the windows—definitely not an Irish design they'd feature in the museum.

The northbound train was run by Irish Rail, and this time the announcements were all bilingual and in Irish first. There was apparently some sort of mechanical problem with the train, though they never really explained what was up. Among other things the train ran slower than usual, and we made an unscheduled stop in a small town.

Whatever the problem was also meant that they were only serving cold food on the train. I had a sandwich with pulled ham and Irish cheddar (amusing, since before Brexit Britain was campaigning for "cheddar" to be limited to cheese produced in a specific region of southwest England). I was expecting one of those "meal deal" sandwiches, but this one was freshly prepared, and it was quite tasty. I hadn't expected it to be served on rye bread but that also improved the flavor. The sandwich came with a small salad that was really



**Wooden shackles
worn by Irish Travelers
National Museum of Ireland**

just a bit of lettuce with vinaigrette atop it. I also had a Magner's Irish cider. I found it interesting that they served hard cider over ice, but I actually found it quite good that way.

I checked my e-mail using the train's wi-fi, and I was amused to find that Yahoo served me an add for the Center for American Voters Abroad. Obviously they'd tracked my location, and they also knew I was American.

I read more from the Jacinda Ardern autobiography, and I watched a middle-aged male passenger flirt with the young girl from Spain who worked as the waitress in the car. It really bordered on harassment, but she took it well. Otherwise it was a pretty uneventful ride.

Because of the delays it was right at 8pm when we got back to Belfast. There was an 8:05 train to Bangor, but I saw it pulling away as I made it to that platform. Fortunately the next one was at 8:25. I was dead tired when I got back to the hotel and pretty much just collapsed.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 4

BANGOR, BELFAST, & THE GIANT'S CAUSEWAY, NORTHERN IRELAND

When I got up this morning, for some reason I couldn't get the bathroom light to turn on. For safety reasons, British bathrooms always have the light switch outside the room so that water and electricity don't mix. You have to put the switch into the down position to turn on the light. For some reason the switch seemed to have gotten stuck between "on" and "off", and I couldn't get it to move. Eventually I gave up and took a shower in the dark.

I could have just called my walk to the station a shower, as it was quite a rainy morning, easily the wettest I'd had on this trip. I was glad to have my jacket with me. The wind kept blowing it off, though, and if I zipped it, it was uncomfortably warm.

I bought an americano at the station and then went up to the platform to catch the same 6:51 train I'd gotten yesterday. This time the signs were correct as to when its departure time was. While the train was busier than it had been yesterday, the ride into Belfast was uneventful.

I was supposed to meet for my first excursion of the day in front of the Leonardo Hotel. I attempted to follow Google Maps' directions and got thoroughly confused. I'm not really sure what route they were attempting to do, since it turned out the hotel was only two blocks away from the station. I ended up walking about a mile getting there, though.

I had booked a fairly common tourist outing, a black cab tour of Belfast focusing on the period called "the troubles". This was another thing I'd chosen largely because of my mother. Another of her penpals lived in Belfast, and I can remember seeing clippings the penpal sent with headlines like "Terror by the Hour". It's certainly possible to see all the troubles-related sites on your own, but I knew it would be easier (particularly with bum knees) to do a guided tour. I also thought the black cab aspect would be fun.



**Wall and gate between Protestant and Catholic areas
(both put up in the 1970s)
Belfast, Northern Ireland**

Almost all the black cab tours are designed for small groups. I searched a long time to find one that would accept a party of one. Of course I paid a supplement over the usual fee, but the price (right at \$100 when booked online) seemed reasonable for the personalized tour I got. A woman named Paula who I'd guess just slightly younger than me drove me around in a black Mercedes van and gave a very detailed and educational tour. It lasted a little over an hour and a half, and it was one of the best things I did on this trip.



Paula explained the significance of doing these tours in black cabs. During the troubles both the Catholic republicans and the Protestant loyalists frequently did car bombings. They had an informal truce, though, that said that black cabs would not be bombed, since they were the owners' livelihood. They never were attacked, and they became a place of refuge for people on both sides to cross through unfriendly areas.



**LEFT: Memorial on the site of a bombed-out council house
(Note the wall in the back yard of the home that still stands.)**



RIGHT: Mural honoring hunger striker Bobby Sands

We first drove to the start of Falls Road in western Belfast, where Paula parked on the sidewalk (which is very common all over Britain) and gave a brief history lesson on the ongoing tensions between Britain and Ireland. This largely goes back to Oliver Cromwell, who invaded Ireland, declared Catholicism illegal, and tried to colonize the island with Protestant settlers from England and Scotland. The Irish struggled to gain independence ever since then, with the biggest fight happening while the English were distracted by the first world war. A compromise was reached shortly after the war that would divide the island into a Catholic region in the south and a Protestant region in the north—in spite of the fact that people of both faiths lived in both areas. Ireland eventually became fully independent after World War II, while Northern Ireland remained a part of the United Kingdom. The struggle in the north was really over whether they should unite with southern Ireland or continue being ruled from London.

The troubles included violent uprisings on both sides of the issue. In America when we think of the era at all, we generally hear about the Irish Republican Army, the Catholic group that fought for a united Ireland. They were in the news more largely because they also did violent attacks outside of Northern Ireland, including bombing cars that carried members of the royal family. Several loyalist groups (with names like the Orange Brigade) were equally violent, though. A large number of deaths also came at the hands of the British army, who took over policing in Northern Ireland. Sadly, the way they handled that seems remarkably similar to the misconduct we've seen in America from groups like ICE.

The army erected walls to divide Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods. These also made me think of home, as they're remarkably like what you see along the Mexican border in places like El Paso and San Diego. They go right through people's back yards. They also erected gates with checkpoints where people could pass. The gates are still used today, because many elderly residents find them reassuring.

Planned graffiti decorates the walls and the sides of many buildings in western Belfast. There are murals portraying the troubles with a sort of "lest we forget" mentality. There are also a number of memorial gardens, which have mostly been erected on the sites of houses that were bombed out. On the tour we also visited a Catholic monastery whose abbot was the primary go-between for the leaders of both sides.

The troubles were at their height in the 1970s, but they continued nearly until the new millennium. The dark spot in history ended with the Good Friday Accord, which was signed on April 10, 1998. The agreement has stuck for more than twenty-five years, and today Belfast is generally a very peaceful city. It has the same crime you'd find anywhere, but constant terrorism is no longer something people worry about.

I really did enjoy this tour, and I learned a lot, too. If anyone does happen to find themselves in Northern Ireland, I'd definitely encourage them to take a black taxi "troubles" tour as well.

I made my way back to Grand Central Station, where I spent some time uploading the pictures I'd taken on the tour. The station's free wi-fi was horrible, so it took forever to get that done.

On a whim I caught a train eastward to Holywood, which is pronounced like Tinseltown, even though there's only one "l" in the "holy" at the first part of the name. I'd passed this repeatedly on the train and there looked to be a nice walkway along the coast there. There was, and I spent about half an hour walking along the seawall and enjoying the views.

I caught a train back to Grand Central. Sitting at a table just down from me were two musicians who were discussing various gigs they had arranged. I also found out that the reason hotels were ridiculously expensive in Belfast this week was because there was a music festival going on. Belfast is apparently a pricey place anyway, though. One of the musicians was considering moving to Bangor, because at the moment the best deal he could get was a small apartment shared with three other people, where each paid £125 a week. That works out to £2,000 pounds month for what was apparently not a particularly nice place.

My other adventure today was a package tour that left at 1pm from the Europa Hotel, which is basically across the street from the Leonardo. The guide this morning had explained that the Europa was once the only nice hotel in Belfast, the place where foreign dignitaries stayed. Because of that it has the dubious honor of being the most bombed hotel in the world. It appeared the scars had healed, and today it looks like any other upscale hotel from the '60s.

I saw a bus from Paddywagon Tours parked in an alley beside the hotel. I'd booked my tour through an online reseller, and they didn't specifically mention the company name. It appeared to be the only tour around, though, so I went up and spoke with the guy outside it. He just asked my name and had me board the bus. There appear to be dozens of companies that operate the same tour I was taking, but Paddywagon was the only one that left from the Europa.

Eventually we had a full busload and set off. The guide explained a few landmarks in downtown Belfast (which were dubious at best) and pointed out the entrance to Falls Road, where I'd started my tour this morning. He didn't seem to care for the black cab tours, probably since they're run by independent cabbies rather than his company.

We joined the M-2 motorway and drove eastward past the port area. We then angled north and exited onto a road that alternated between two and four lanes, with numerous rural roundabouts along the way. While we drove the guide told us about the Irish people's traditional belief in fairies or spirits of various kinds. He also played moder Irish music, which is basically a country—rock meld.

The guide pointed out Slemish Mountain, where St. Patrick is said to have worked as a shepherd after being sent to Ireland. That brought up something the guide this morning had mentioned. We hear of Patrick driving the snakes out of Ireland. "Snakes", however, was almost certainly a metaphor for the pagan Druid people. St. Patrick did Christianize Ireland, but he didn't rid of it of any actual snakes. There are in fact still some snakes in Ireland, though far fewer than you'd find in many other places.

Our first stop was at a viewpoint on a cliff above the coast at the narrowest passage between Ireland and Great Britain. It's just twelve miles to Scotland from here, and apparently on clear days you can see it clearly. It was too foggy to see that far today, but it was still a nice view. Of course the real purpose was to give everyone a chance to stretch their legs.

Once we had left the viewpoint the guide explained the myth of the Giant's Causeway, which would be our ultimate destination. Supposedly a giant from Ireland built the causeway (which is actually a rock formation that extends into the ocean) so he could go over to Scotland, fight a giant there, and conquer the land. The myth says that the Scottish giant beat him to the punch and came over to Ireland instead. The Irish giant's wife made him pretend to be a baby, and the Scottish giant thought that if a baby could be that large, then his father must be truly immense. He fled back to Scotland and knocked the stones that would form most of the mythical causeway into the sea.

The myth filled most of the time as we followed winding roads to the parking area above the Giant's Causeway. The guide explained that under no circumstances should we visit the visitors center, which is run by the National Trust and charges a £19 admission. I really wish they'd have included that admission in the price of the package tour and let us go in. He was very clear that there was nothing worth seeing there, though, and that we could visit the stones themselves for free. He also gave a plug for a hotel, café, and gift shop across the street from the visitors' center, which I assume gives him a kickback.

Most people take about a kilometer walk to get from the parking area down to the actual stones that form the Giant's Causeway. While I'd made a point of taking some ibuprofen earlier, I was glad there was an alternative. In an effort to provide access for the disabled, Translink runs a bus from the visitors' center down to the stones. It's basically a city bus, and they charge a £1 fare. I got rid of a combination of smaller coins that added up to a pound to clear my pocket a bit. The bus follows a very narrow road that parallels the trail. Many pedestrians actually walk on the road, because the trail is too narrow to accommodate all the people who use it. The bus was crowded, but not unpleasant, and it certainly beat walking to the bottom and then back up.

The Giant's Causeway is a cool rock formation, and it probably deserves to be Northern Ireland's only UNESCO world heritage site. Unfortunately it suffers from far too many visitors. The place is full of college girls jumping in the air to get their perfect Instagram shots and young couples pushing strollers around. I spent about ten minutes wandering around by the stones, though I wasn't going to tempt fate by going out on the rocks themselves. Then I got in the queue for the bus back up the hill.

Understandably a lot more people take the bus uphill than down. The line was long enough that not everyone could cram onto the first bus that showed up. I was fine with that, since it basically meant I was guaranteed a seat on the next one. I did have to stand in line a few more minutes, but my leg was generally feeling better today.



Giant's Causeway – Northern Ireland



When I got back to the top of the hill I made my way over to the hotel the guide plugged, which had public toilets. There was an enormous line out the door for the backed-up ladies' room. While there was no line for the gents', I had to wait to get to the front before I could see it was available. They'd really do well to just have two unisex toilets.

I went to the gift shop in the hotel and found a couple of nice, if overpriced, things I wanted to buy. That was easier said than done, though, as the employees completely ignored me, mostly in favor of restaurant guests. It intrigued me that the place accepted multiple currencies for payment. A guy paid for his bar bill using euro banknotes, but he got his change in pounds.

The guide had gone to gas the bus up while we were exploring. He told us he would be back at 3:50pm and that the bus would leave promptly at 4:05. He did show up at 3:50. There was a bit of confusion while we boarded, though, because a waitress came running out of a nearby café with a cell phone someone had found. It didn't belong to anyone who was on the bus yet, though eventually they'd track down the owner.

There is a rope bridge near the Giant's Causeway, and apparently two Chinese girls had gone there while the others saw the rock formation. The driver had told them they should be back at the bus by four and that he would be leaving at 4:05. Perhaps needless to say, 4:05 came and went, and those girls were not accounted for. The driver called his dispatcher, who apparently called the girls. They said they were two minutes away from the bus. We waited ten more minutes, and they didn't show. The dispatcher then told the driver to just leave; the girls would have to be responsible for finding their way back to Belfast.

It's actually perfectly possible to get from Belfast to the Giant's Causeway by a combination of train and bus. At one point I'd planned to do that, but the tour seemed an easier option and was about the same price as transit tickets would have been. Given how things ended up going with my knee, I'm glad I made the choice I did.

Instead of following the main road back, we detoured to some rather pointless attractions. We saw a town that is home to a big motorcycle race, a whiskey distillery, and the so-called famous dark hedges that were featured in *Game of Thrones*. We didn't stop to actually see any of those, but we did drive by them from the bus. Getting to them required driving on really bad rural roads. On one of those we had to pass an unoccupied tractor that was just parked on the road. On the way back to Belfast the guide explained Irish death traditions and played more traditional Irish music.

We got back to Belfast about 5:30pm. I had dinner at a Gregg's across from the Europa Hotel and then made my way back to the station. I just relaxed back at the hotel and went to bed relatively early.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 5

BANGOR, NORTHERN IRELAND TO LONDON, ENGLAND

After two straight days of getting up quite early, I actually slept in today. My alarm was set for 7:45, and I stayed in bed until then. Once I did get up, it was a pretty lazy morning. I managed to get the bathroom light working again, and—just in case—I kept it on all morning. Then I spent some time working on the travelogue and packing up my stuff. I was a bit more concerned about the packing than I had been coming to Belfast. While British Airlines allows Club Europe passengers to check two bags for free, I'd be an economy customer on United tomorrow, and I needed to be sure everything I needed to check would fit in one bag for that flight.

After a pretty restful morning I left the hotel just before 11am. I was surprised that it was raining rather hard out, nearly horizontal rain with lots of wind. The window of my room must have faced away from the wind, because I hadn't even realized it was raining.

I made it over to Bangor station and caught the 11:11 train. I purposely chose to sit in an area that can be used as a wheelchair space because my luggage was less in the way there. When the conductor came around he asked what team the cap with a "G" on it was supporting. I told him it was a school in the States, and that started a long conversation between him, the other passengers nearby, and me. Apparently Bangor doesn't get many American tourists. The Premier Inn there couldn't have worked better for me, though. The people of Northern Ireland seem extremely concerned that people like the place. I did find the people very friendly, but honestly Belfast as a whole I didn't care much for. I did, however, skip the city's biggest attraction, the Titanic Museum. The city has that museum because the Titanic was built in its shipyards. I saw a similar museum when I visited Halifax (where the survivors were evacuated) a few years back, and I suspect the one in Belfast wouldn't have taught me much that was new.

I lugged my bags up to the skywalk over the motorway and then back down the other side. That actually went better today than it had when I arrived. I think things were packed more evenly, and it was certainly also good that I was doing that at the start of the day rather than the end.

People who moved quicker than me had called the shuttle, and it arrived right when I reached the bottom of the stairs. I saw as we boarded that there is indeed a pedestrian route to the airport. It doesn't go through the parking lot, though, but right along the shoulder of the motorway. I was happy not to follow it.

It was just before noon when I entered the terminal. I went to the British Airways desk and found they wouldn't check bags until two hours prior to departure. For my flight that would start at 12:35. I found one of very few available seats on the public side of the airport, got out my computer, and finished yesterday's update.

I was the first one in line to check my bag, and then I proceeded to security. Something I didn't mention before is that the body scanner machines in Britain are different from the ones America's TSA uses. At home you have to stand with your hands above your head, while in Britain you put your arms out at your side. The British machines are also open, rather than having a scanner with a door that closes and then goes around in a circle (rather like the toilets in British trains). My knee sleeves again came up as an anomaly. They didn't have the special scanner machine in Belfast, so the guy did an explosives swab. For me that came up "pass", and I was on my way.

Belfast has a duty-free shop I'd expect to see at Heathrow. It's truly enormous. I had to wind around past shelf after shelf of perfume, alcohol, tobacco, and designer handbags before reaching the main part of the secure side of the airport.

British Airways doesn't have its own lounge at Belfast. Instead they contract with a privately owned place called the Aspire Lounge to take their premium passengers. Others can get in by paying £35, but it appeared very few did. This was by far the quietest of the lounges I visited on this trip, and that alone made it the most pleasant. They had a nice lunch spread as well. I took a little of many different dishes: pasta alfredo with mushrooms, chicken tenders with sweet chili sauce, home fries (which they called roasted potatoes), nut bread with delicious butter, a pleasant tossed salad, a salad made with couscous, spinach, and peas, a roll of cold ham, a triangle of cheddar cheese, a cherry bakewell, and a traditional blackcurrant scone (which is basically a drop biscuit) with clotted cream (which is sort of halfway between whipped cream and butter) and strawberry jam. I feel like I'm describing what the Ghost of Christmas Present showed Scrooge as they looked out over the market, but it really was quite a spread.

My boarding pass said the flight would board at 14:05 (i.e., 2:05pm). I left the lounge at 1:55, but the gate still hadn't been posted. At precisely 2:05 they announced it would leave from Gate #8. Every gate except #4 boards from the tarmac, so I took the lift down and made my way past seven other gates. They'd started a double line there, with one side for Club Europe and the other for Euro Traveler passengers. They still weren't actually boarding, because they were waiting for an EasyJet flight to Manchester to depart from Gate #9. Once it was gone they ushered people out to steps that had been set up beside the plane.

This flight was on a small plane, an Embraer 175, the sort of plane where almost everyone has to check their carry-on bags. The duffel bag I used for my carry-on (which I've had since I went to Spain more than forty years ago) did fit with no problem, though it certainly helped that I was in Club Europe. The seating on an Embraer is in a 2—2 configuration, and for Club Europe they only sell seats A and D. That meant everyone in the first five rows effectively had the whole row to themselves. It was actually more comfortable than on the 3—3 plane with the middle seat blocked. I took my seat in 2-A and settled in quickly.

A highlight of the boarding process was when a kid noticed the door was open to the cockpit. The head flight attendant asked if he'd like to meet the pilots, and he was ecstatic. Apparently it was also his birthday, so it must have been quite a day for him.

Boarding was complete at 2:25, and they went through the safety demonstration quickly. We took off to the west over the city and soon circled south and back east. On the initial part of the flight we cut over heavy clouds, which made for a rather rough take-off.

They again served a light meal in Club Europe. This time I had vegan sushi and, plus a roll (with very non-vegan butter) and mango mousse. I'd never had sushi of any sort before, but the vegan kind (assorted vegetables and nuts wrapped in rice) wasn't too bad. It came with a very sweet sauce (very typical for Japanese food) and extremely hot wasabi. The other choice was a salad with

honey braised salmon, and I knew I'd like the vegetarian option better. I had a Diet Coke with my meal, but of course most of my fellow Club Europe passengers had booze of one sort or another. I did accept a glass of actual French champagne that the flight attendant offered during our descent. That was served with pretzels.



Mouth of the Thames River

Our route was quite different than it had been flying westward. We crossed Great Britain and flew way out over the North Sea (to the point that I think I could see the Netherlands out the window). We then turned back to approach London from the east. We followed straight along the Thames and finally landed at London City Airport (a tiny airport in the docklands area) right at 3:45pm.

I'm sure there is some form of accessibility at London City Airport. The route they directed us on, though, was a maze of staircases. We went up and down and then up and down again before finally arriving at baggage claim. I quickly used the restroom while I was waiting for my bag, and it arrived almost immediately after I returned. I went upstairs again and eventually found my way to the City Airport station on the Docklands Light Railway.

London City Airport is convenient for important people with business in the docklands or the main downtown area of London. It would also work well for those who live in or are visiting the eastern part of the city. Unfortunately I would be flying out of Heathrow tomorrow, and that's just about as far from City Airport as you can get. Fortunately my experience with Transport for London went pretty much as it should have today. I tapped

my Oyster card to start my journey right at 4:00pm, took the DLR to Canning Town, the Jubilee line to Green Park, and then the Piccadilly line to Hounslow Central. The transfers required a lot of walking, but they went fine, and I tapped out at Hounslow at 5:20pm. The Oyster reader first showed a yellow light, but eventually it changed to green and made the correct beep.

My hotel tonight was the Travelodge—Hounslow, which is exactly two blocks from the entrance to Hounslow Central station. I had considered staying at a Ramada on the next block, and that's probably what I should have done. Like the one in Slough, this Travelodge is not air-conditioned. While it got better after sunset, when I arrived the room was truly miserable. A clue to how warm it was: the complimentary Kit-Kats they had next to the coffee and tea were a melted mess. The Ramada is air conditioned, and I think that probably would have been worth another £10 a night. I can understand why historic buildings built centuries ago don't have air conditioning, but it doesn't make sense to me why they wouldn't install it in a new build like this Travelodge. They just had their third major heat wave of the summer in London, and they're expecting another next week. I'd think they'd figure out that there's a need for better cooling.

THURSDAY, **A**UGUST 6 LONDON, ENGLAND TO CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

It didn't really cool off in London last night. While it was tolerable with the fan going on high all night, it was still quite close in the room. It was actually a good thing that the shower had issues with hot water, because a cold shower was refreshing.

I spent a while consolidating my bags even more (basically getting all the weight into the checked bag), and I left the hotel right at 7:45. Hounslow Central station is not accessible, so I had to carry my bags up thirty-six steps to get to the platform. It went slowly, but I got everything up there all right.

Hounslow is the westernmost borough in Greater London, right next to the airport. The tube station for Heathrow Terminals 2 & 3 is just four stops away from Hounslow Central. The ride still took twenty-five minutes, though. Basically the train circles the perimeter of the airport before heading back to Terminals 2 & 3. I had plenty of time, though, so it was no big deal.

As I arrived in the tube station I got a text saying that my flight had been delayed. I was supposed to leave at 11:00, and now it was scheduled for 12:30. They gave me several options to reschedule, but all of those would either have been on later flights or would require transferring in Newark or Washington.

It's quite a long walk from the station to the departures area. I had to walk down a long hall, along a moving walkway, and up five different escalators. There were signs as I entered the departures area that United Airlines was in Area D. I made my way over to that area, but every kiosk I saw had a choice of basically every Sky Team airline except United. It turned out there were exactly two kiosks that were set up to handle United flights. A large south Asian family that seemed to have a dozen bags each were using one of those while completely blocking the other. I waited about fifteen minutes behind them before eventually asking a woman if there was an actual check-in desk for United. She quickly directed me there. When I got to the staffed area, a woman directed me out of the line and

had me go to the premium check-in area, which was available since no high-level customers were using it. I checked my bag quickly and was on my way to security.

This time the security people made me completely remove the knee sleeves before they'd let me through the scanner. Those and my shoes (which I had to remove to get the sleeves off) went through the x-ray instead. The attendants asked me again and again if I had anything in my pockets. They seemed surprised when I said I didn't and even more surprised when I went through the scanner with no issues.

Just past security was a place called Bill's Breakfast, which really seemed more like one of those bars you can find in every airport. I killed quite a bit of time there, because they had some of the worst service I've seen in some time. I was seated quickly, but I waited about ten minutes until a waitress who barely spoke English took my order. I suspect her native language was Spanish, and I'd likely have understood her better had she spoken that. I did manage to order, and my food (a loaded hash brown skillet, which was basically tater-tots covered with cheese, bacon, and chives) arrived quickly. I'd also ordered coffee and an apple juice, though, and I waited and waited and waited for them. I'd completely finished the food when the waitress happened by and noticed I hadn't gotten my drinks. It took about five more minutes before she brought them, and about fifteen more before I got the check. I paid in exact change, which allowed me to use up some of my excess U.K. cash. Given that the flight was delayed, it wasn't really a problem that service was slow. I'd really expect an airport restaurant to move faster, though.

I spent about an hour in the main waiting area, mostly inserting pictures into this travelogue. The signs all said "awaiting gate" for my flight, but fortunately the United app reveals that information quite a bit earlier than Heathrow. The app said we'd be leaving from Gate B-48, so I made my way downstairs to the actual departure level and slowly went through long hallways and many more moving walkways to get to that gate. (Basically I went deep under the tarmac and then back up on the opposite side.) No flight was posted at the gate, but it did indeed turn out to be the correct one.

I spent much of my remaining British currency on pop and snacks. I'd leave with a ten-pound note and less than four pounds in change. To me that's a win. I spent a lot of the coins at a vending machine that actually accepted them. Most British vending machines are card only, and I was a bit surprised to see one that did accept coins at the airport.

The app said we'd be boarding at 11:40am. That turned out not to be the case. The crew didn't even board until about 12:10, and it was right at 12:20 when they let the first passengers on. I was in boarding group 5 (of 6), so it was about 12:30 when I finally got on board. A poor girl right in front of me in line had been selected for extra screening at the gate.

Interestingly Heathrow doesn't have those machines that photograph your face and compare it with your passport data for international flights. I did have to show my passport and boarding pass to the gate attendant, and then I scanned the boarding pass (but not the passport) to gain entrance to the jetway.

My assigned seat was again 42-F. When I found the seat, I was surprised that there was no safety card in the seat pocket, something I thought they were required to check between flights. Also the touchscreen for the entertainment system didn't work. It was frozen on the "select language" screen. While all I typically do is watch the map, one of the flight attendants was very concerned that the screen wasn't working. She tried to reset it, and when that didn't work, after we reached cruising altitude, she had me move to Row 37, where I had the whole center section to myself.

While the boarding process was a bit chaotic, they did manage to close the doors at 12:40, which was the time the app said the delayed flight would be departing. They mentioned the reason for the delay was that this plane had come in from Newark, where there were thunderstorms last night. They played the safety video while we were still at the gate and began taxiing around 12:55. We were finally in the air at 1:08pm—or 7:08am Chicago time.

Take-off was rather bumpy, but most of the flight was quite smooth. They had a drink service accompanied by the same olives and almonds we'd been given flying to London. Lunch reminded me of the train attendant who described a dish as tasting better than it looked. This meal didn't look like much. I had chicken cassoulet (a very thick stew), together with a tiny side salad and a dinner roll with butter from Northern Ireland. The dessert was a bag of miniature French truffles. The food was accompanied by miniature bamboo cutlery that looked like something a little girl might use for a tea party with her dolls.

It was very cold on this flight. I'd dressed for summer and packed my jacket away, which was a mistake. I think this is the first time I've ever used a blanket on a plane other than as a pillow, but it was truly necessary on this flight.

Since they'd made a point of moving me, I did take advantage of the in-flight entertainment. I watched a couple of episodes of *The Simpsons* and a couple of travel documentaries. Mostly, though, I had the map on and read more of Jacinda Ardern's autobiography. I also spent some time getting caught up on this journal.

There was another drink service as we flew over Newfoundland. Then, about an hour and a half before landing they served the lightest meal I've ever had on a plane. I can remember when "snack" meant a ham sandwich. On this flight it was a box that contained a product called "The Original Mediterranean Pizza Twist". There was a choice of cheese or chicken. I chose the former, since it was hard to imagine chicken with pizza sauce. Basically it was like an open-face hot pocket or about three pizza rolls. That was the entire

meal. The dough was undercooked, and the filling was flavorless. I'd say this was the worst meal I've had on a plane, even outranking the disgusting vegetarian meal I had on ANA flying to Japan.

We circled O'Hare for about twenty minutes before finally landing at 3:36pm. All international flights arrive at the M-gates at Terminal 5. We taxied and taxied and taxied to get there, finally stopping at a gate at 4:07pm.

We were actually at the gate closest to the entrance to customs and immigration, so there was a bit less walking than there otherwise might have been. Late afternoon is when basically every international flight arrives at O'Hare, though, so there was still a bit of a wait. In fact, the line for "all others" was moving faster than the line for "U.S. Citizens" and the global entry line. Once I did get to the front of the line, the actual processing took no time at all. An officer pointed to a sign that had various agricultural products on it and asked if I had any of them. I then stood by the camera that matched me with my passport, and without even opening that passport I was back in the U.S.A. They'd actually posted the wrong baggage carousel, but once that got corrected my luggage came fairly quickly.



EPP card from U.S. Customs & Immigration

The immigration officer gave pretty much everyone (myself included) a laminated card that said "EPP". I have a picture someone else posted online of one of those cards here. I googled it and found out it stands for "enhanced passenger processing". Basically they do an electronic check of the manifest of the plane to identify U.S. citizens who have no criminal history. If the biometric data from the photo matches the passport, those passengers are sent on with no further questioning—precisely what they did with me. It's like a manual version of the e-gates other countries use for immigration.

Since we'd arrived at Terminal 5, I had to take the airport tram to get over to Terminal 2 where the 'L' station is. (It's actually underneath the O'Hare Hilton, which is across from Terminal 2.) It was a chore to get to the tram because the escalator that would normally lead there was broken. Eventually I did make it to the 'L' station, though.

For some reason they seemed to have maximum security at the O'Hare 'L' station today. I counted at least seven police officers in there and two security dogs. They didn't seem to be doing anything, but they certainly made their presence known.

I rode two stops east to Cumberland. This station is a park-and-ride, and it's never been pedestrian friendly. It seems to have gotten worse, though. The station is directly across the street from my hotel, but it took more than ten minutes to get there.

I was pleasantly surprised when I checked in to the Holiday Inn—O'Hare. I'd completely forgotten that I'd booked this stay with points, and it was nice not to have to pay for another night of lodging. I must say, too, that it was nice to be in an American hotel—one with two queen-sized (not double) beds, one with lots of electrical outlets, one with a fridge and microwave in the room (not that I used either) and an ice machine in the hall, and one with adequate wastebaskets. The British hotels invariably had one tiny "bin" in the main part of the room, often divided into waste and recycling. Then there was an even smaller receptacle in the bathroom that I think was intended for feminine products. I'll probably throw away less in Chicago than I did anywhere in the U.K., but it's nice to have wastebaskets that are large enough to fit something.

I purposely stayed up until about nine so I could better adjust to Central Time. I can't say I did much, though.

FRIDAY, **A**UGUST 7 **CHICAGO, ILLINOIS TO MAQUOKETA, IOWA**

My preference would have been to sleep in late this morning, but of course I was wide awake not long after 5am. I still managed to get a pretty decent amount of sleep, though. The Holiday Inn shower was probably the best I had on this trip—really good pressure and nice, hot water. They also had a good coffee machine that helped me get started for the day. The electric kettles they have in Britain are fine, but I do like fresh-brewed coffee more than instant.

I had breakfast at the hotel this morning. It wasn't free, which it never is at a "nice" hotel. They charged \$14.99 for their buffet, plus tax and tip. (The check suggested 22% for a tip, but I thought 15% was more than enough for the minimal service.) I paid cash, and I actually paid slightly less than the official total, because there were no coins in the restaurant's register. While I'm sure most people either pay with a credit card or charge it to their room, they really should be prepared to make change for the \$16.67 total the bill is with tax.

While Brits would not like the lack of beans and pain au chocolat, and they'd say the eggs were overcooked (as opposed to runny, like they're generally served in the U.K.), I felt this was the nicest of the buffets I'd been to on this trip. They had pretty much anything you could possibly want. I had scrambled eggs, bacon (the crispy American version), assorted fruit, a slice of French toast, and

an apple turnover. I also had something I'd never seen on a breakfast spread before—quesadillas. They were just little wedges of tortilla filled with cheese, but it actually made a nice breakfast item.

The hotel restaurant was actually a sports bar. It was memorable because they had four large televisions tuned to the same station. What was weird was that the color had been adjusted differently on the different sets. One appeared to be more or less correct, a second was lacking in red tones, a third in blues, and the fourth was entirely black and white. It was interesting to see recaps of the same teams playing, with their uniforms looking entirely different.

I was amused to get e-mails today from Travelodge Britain asking me to review the two of their properties I stayed at. They probably don't want my reviews. The places weren't hovels, but they weren't great, and the biggest problem is that they absolutely need to install air conditioning. There's really no excuse for not having that in 2026. I doubt I'll be heading back to the U.K. soon, but if I do, I'd likely stay anywhere but Travelodge. On the other hand, if anyone reading this is planning a British trip, Premier Inn is an excellent chain. I really wish we had them in the States. I think it helps that they're company owned rather than franchised, so the standards are more uniform.

Around 8:30 I made my way over to the Cumberland 'L' station. Signs both there and at O'Hare yesterday said that trains to Forest Park ran every five minutes. That was definitely wishful thinking, though. In fact I waited about ten minutes for a train yesterday and a full fifteen this morning. I was glad that I was boarding near the end of the line. I managed to get a seat and a place to put my bags beside me. Passengers had been waiting as long as I had at all the other stations, though, so of course the train just got fuller and fuller as we went along.

Except for being crowded, the ride downtown was uneventful. I purposely chose to transfer to the green line rather than going to the blue line's Clinton stop. The green line is further from the Amtrak station (my ultimate destination), but the blue line is in the subway and requires ascending a flight of stairs to get to the surface. Unfortunately once I got to the Clinton green line station I found that both their elevator and escalator were out of service, so I ended up having to go down about forty steps—actually more than the blue line would have been, but down rather than up.

I'd used points to buy a pass for the Amtrak lounge, and my intent was to leave my bags there and go out exploring through lunch time. When I went to the entrance the staff rather rudely informed me that there had been a change in policy (whether by Amtrak or by Union Station, I don't know). First, access was no restricted to three hours prior to a train's departure. More importantly, people with purchased passes (as opposed to those traveling in sleeping cars) were no longer allowed to store luggage or to leave the lounge and re-enter. I could understand this policy in New York, where they serve actual meals in the Amtrak lounge. Chicago just has light pre-packaged sacks, though, and since they relocated it, it's large enough that it's rarely overcrowded. It's unlikely I'll be using Amtrak again before the pass expires, though, so I figured I'd enter at precisely 10:30 (the three-hour limit) and have their snacks for lunch. While I was waiting I checked the Amtrak website, and nowhere are these policies explained. I e-mailed to complain, but I'll have to wait and see if anything comes from that.

I particularly don't understand why they won't let people store bags with a pass. That would actually mean less of their refreshments would be consumed, so presumably it would cost them less. If I could check bags to Princeton, I'd get rid of them that way, but (like most small stations) they don't have a luggage check service there.

At about noon they announced that there would be a delay in boarding train #3, the Southwest Chief. Apparently there was some sort of mechanical issue, so the engine wasn't yet ready. They finally announced that they were ready for boarding at about 12:45. They used to have coach passengers walk to the train with the sleeper passengers in the lounge, but their changes have eliminated that as well. The clerk told me to walk to the departure area and join the queue there. I did make my way down to what they used to call the "south lounge" (now it's "south boarding area"), but the employees there seemed confused when I said I was there to board train #3. Apparently they hadn't publicly announced that the train was available yet, though when I said I'd come from the Metropolitan Lounge, they were fine with that and had me wait in the handicapped area until they were ready to board coach passengers.

They began actually boarding the train at 1:55pm. Unlike most Amtrak trains, they used assigned seating on this one. I had booked a lower-level seat on the double-decker train. When I bought the ticket I'd mostly done that because the bottom is generally quieter, but it worked out great with my knee issues. I was assigned to the front row of the lower level. That was easy to get to and gave me plenty of room to spread out.

The train left at 2:23pm, about fifty-five minutes late. They implied that we should retain that delay for most of the trip, but we ended up making an unscheduled ten-minute stop just west of Naperville. It was right at 4:30 (an hour and fifteen minutes late) when we finally got to Princeton.

I was delighted that my car was still in the Princeton parking lot and that it started right up. I headed west on Interstate 80 and had just a bit of delay with some construction on the Illinois side of the Quad Cities. Traffic was extremely heavy on U.S. 61, but I made it up to Maquoketa with no problem. I got there just as a few drops of rain were beginning to fall. Just a couple minutes after I was inside at John and Janet's, it began pouring. John brought in some pork chops he had been grilling, and they finished them in the oven. We had them, a broccoli salad, and some really tasty cheese biscuits for dinner. Then we spent the evening visiting while I answered various questions about my trip.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 8

MAQUOKETA, IOWA TO ALGONA, IOWA

I spent the night at John and Janet's and had a surprisingly good night's sleep. I was still wide awake at 6am, though—not really surprising both with the change of time zones and the early days I'd had through most of the trip. Janet made scrambled eggs with ham and cheese for breakfast, and I spent much of the morning going through the pictures I'd taken on the computer. John and Janet said they enjoyed seeing them, and it was kind of fun to relive the trip as I showed them.

I left at about a quarter to eleven. I headed up to Dubuque and then west on highway 20. My first stop was at the Wal-Mart in Independence, and my only other stop was at a Casey's in Clear Lake. The price there was \$3.35⁹ per gallon, or less than half what fuel was going for in Great Britain. I was a bit annoyed that I had 12¢ worth of Hy-Vee fuel saver points that had expired unused yesterday. I should have used them when I bought gas in Princeton at the start of the trip, but I'd forgotten about them. ... Oh, well.

I got home at about 3:30pm and spent most of the rest of the day unpacking. School will be starting soon, so while the trip was great, it was time to put it behind me.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What were your favorite and least favorite things?

This actually is a frequently asked question, one that many different people asked. I really liked the whole trip, and it's hard to single anything out. Probably my single favorite thing, though, was visiting Bletchley Park. It suited the math nerd in me, and it's also important historically. I also really liked the black taxi tour of Belfast, visiting the Beatles' childhood homes in Liverpool, and going to church at York Minster.

My least favorite things mostly weren't due to the attractions themselves, but rather because of the throngs of tourists they attracted. I liked Edinburgh's castle and Royal Mile less than I thought I would, mostly because I had to wade through tourists everywhere I went. The same was true at the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland and almost everything in central Dublin. The crowds I encountered on this trip made me appreciate how nice it was to visit New Zealand in winter, outside of prime tourist season.

Was it expensive to visit Britain?

Not really. When Margaret and I went to London two decades ago I wrote that England was the most expensive place I'd ever been. Pretty much everything cost half again or more what it would have at home. Brexit was not good to the pound, though, and on this trip Britain was much more affordable. Almost everything I bought cost the same or even slightly less than it would have in Iowa, and that also seemed the case when I priced things in supermarkets.

It certainly helped that I spent the vast majority of this trip outside of London. Just like New York is more expensive than most of the U.S., London costs more than the rest of Britain. It was also good that the most pricey things on this trip (the flight, the trains, the hotels, and most of the admissions) were prepaid. That meant the main thing I actually paid for during the trip was food, which is a fairly controllable expense.

Was it worth getting the first-class train pass?

For a trip like mine that went all over the country, some sort of train pass was all but essential, since individual British train tickets tend to be quite expensive. I also felt I got good value from paying a bit extra for first class. Not being an overly social person, I far preferred the 2—1 configuration of most of the first-class cars to the standard 2—2 (which often included four people facing each other at a table). I also liked that reservations were included with the first-class pass, so I could be sure I'd have a seat on specific trains. Finally I got breakfast almost every day I travelled as a free extra on the train.

How did your knee do?

Not the greatest, but I made it. The doctor tells me I should get knee replacements the moment I go on Medicare (when it becomes essentially free, rather than expensive). On this trip the knees were honestly more painful than I cared for, though I was certainly not as debilitated as my arthritic mother was when she travelled to Britain years ago. I did pretty much everything I wanted to, but I moved slower than I'm used to going. I have to remember I'm not a young man anymore, but I am grateful for being able to do what I need to do, regardless.