

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, July 11, 2011

The United Kingdom in the 1950s: Elementary school geography and tales like *The Story of Peter Rabbit*, *Winnie the Pooh*, and the novels of Robert Louis Stevenson made “Merrie England” sort of a magical place to me in the 1930s. In those days, it was also said that the sun never set on the British Empire. Although many Yankees would contest this, there was ample proof that London was the center of the English-speaking world. In the 1940s, we learned much more: first the Battle of Britain, and in America “Bundles for Britain,” and an elaborate lend-lease program, all before the U.S. entered World War II. “There’ll be Blue Birds over the White Cliffs of Dover” became a popular song here.

My first trip to Britain was in September 1951. As a young travel agent, I had introductions to many English people while planning American travel to the World Conference of Friends at Oxford University in 1952. It had been six years since the Labor Government of Prime Minister Clement Attlee had defeated Winston Churchill and the Conservatives, and economic recovery following six years of war had been less than impressive. Things were cheap in American dollars, but it was hard to buy a good meal anywhere. My best ones were in private homes, where innovative dishes using the limited food supply were often quite tasty. At a small country inn named Yealand Manor just south of the English Lake District, I paid \$1.75 U.S. for dinner, lodging, and a full English breakfast.

I had flown from New York to London on a BOAC (British Airways) Boeing Stratocruiser, a modified B-29 with a lower deck housing a cocktail lounge for 17 passengers. First we stopped at Logan Airport in Boston, where we were treated by the airline to a full-course dinner in the terminal. About eight hours later, we landed at Prestwick, the airport for Glasgow, Scotland, where again we had a complimentary breakfast. Here I visited with some British businessmen from Birmingham, also passengers on this flight, who told me they were flying home after being on assignment in Australia. They had flown across the Pacific, then the United States, and finally the Atlantic, and the journey was into its fourth day. The short flight from Prestwick to London and a two-hour train ride to Birmingham ended their long trip.

In the summer of 1951, the country was celebrating the Festival of Britain (also the Centennial of the Crystal Palace Exhibition in London, often considered the first World’s Fair). There was a small World’s Fair on the south bank of the Thames near Waterloo Station, and “Illuminations” in resort towns all over Britain. I visited the London exhibition, where one of British Railways’ spit-and-polish high-speed steam locomotives was on display, and I was treated to illuminations in the northwest England resort of Morecambe. During my stay, King George VI, in very poor health, was flown from the royal family’s Balmoral Castle, in Scotland, to London, where he underwent an operation a few months before his death.

I rented a car in London and drove on the left side of the road for the first time, traveling first to Oxford, then north to Stratford-on-Avon, Warwick, Birmingham, and through the Midlands to Lancaster. Finally, I went east across the moors to York, turned in the car, and took a steam train to Edinburgh, a most scenic ride along the coast of the North Sea. I rode all over the city of Edinburgh on the upper deck (above the motorman) on a four-wheeled trolley, almost as high as it was long. After a wonderful eye-opening trip, I flew home from Prestwick.