

The Holiday Letter



Another year, another apology for a mass letter. About all I hope to do with these is confirm our home address and update your mental picture of our daughters' relative sizes.

Our high point this year was a trip to England and Scotland in October. Linda, her mother and I stayed in London for a week, then rented a car and drove down the wrong side of the lane, minding the verge, to see if all the stories in the picture books were true. Our path through England was an exponential spiral, like the shell of the chambered nautilus that is always showing up in math books.

From London we went southwest to Stonehenge, east along the English channel, looped wide around London again, then north west through Yorkshire to the Lake District. We drove in a long zigzag through Scotland, from Edinborough to Oban, then northeast to Inverness. My vacation time ran out then, and I flew home. Linda and her mom stayed another week in Scotland, eating oatcakes and visiting relatives.

The thing that impressed me the most about London was the omnipresent and almost casual history. For instance, the Greater London City Council has fixed small blue plaques on the walls of historic houses; you look up from doing something ordinary and find a bit of History. We ate dinner and found Jose Martin, liberator of the Argentines, had stayed in the house across the street; I bought a cigar and found Isaac Newton had lived next door; we went to a pub and saw that author Brett Hart had lived and died in the hotel above it.



The casualness reached a peak in Westminster Abbey. Our guide paused about halfway in his tour to tell us not to worry about standing on people, since there wasn't room to walk around them; I looked down to read the marker and found I was standing on the mortal remains of Charles Darwin.

Later we came to the abbey's RAF chapel, and the "Battle of Britain" window. It is pretty blunt, for a work in stained glass; it shows angels pulling a dead boy in RAF blue out of a crumpled Spitfire. The contrast between the people whose stones we had been reading and the pilots listed in the book of remembrance, between old, grey historic figures who had died in bed, surrounded by their family, and young men who had met death at 350 miles an hour, in flames, made their particular bit of history come intensely alive, and there I was, falling behind the group to dry my eyes before we went in to see Edward the First.

The thing that impressed me the most about the rest of England was the sheer prettiness of the countryside. It rains enough to keep the grass green in England, and most of the farmers keep sheep; the combination makes the countryside look like a vast putting green. Scotland was in its fall colors; not as vivid as Vermont and New Hampshire, yet more subtle and varied.

We stuck to the "A" and "B" routes as much as we could; A's have two lanes and B's are paved. Yorkshire is as pretty as James Herriot's books say it is, and the Lake country looks like Beatrix Potter's paintings; little cottages, narrow roads with stone walls on each side, trees meeting overhead. We spent a happy week trying to take a perfect picture of sheep, putting up in Bed & Breakfast places, eating in pubs. We spent quite a

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few evenings, in Town and the country, trying a pint of everything the pub had on tap, then strolling back to our lodgings.

The low point of the year came one morning in November, when Heather, our 53-pound daughter, climbed through the fence to tell Auriga, Linda's 850-pound horse, to stop fighting with Jessie, Linda's 800-pound horse. Auriga kicked out, smashing Heather into the ground with as much ease and concern as he would swat a fly. I was in the house toasting muffins when I heard Linda start screaming; a couple of general "ooooh"s, then a specific "Ted - call an ambulance", which I did without stopping looking outside. The 911 operator asked me what for, and a number of possibilities flashed through my mind; 100-pound bales of hay falling, black widows, pitchforks. The horse option seemed likeliest, so I said I didn't know but guessed a horse had kicked one of the kids. She sent an ambulance and the VFD rescue truck. Three volunteer firemen showed up on their own, having heard the call on their way to work. It made for an exciting morning.

Two hours later Heather was in the hospital, having ridden in an ambulance, had her blood tested at 30-minute intervals, and been CAT-scanned. The hoof had hit her rib cage. (All of it; small rib cage, large hoof). She had a small tear on her liver, which prevented her from vigorous activity for 8 weeks. All in all we were lucky; six inches over might have ruptured her spleen and she could have bled to death. Eight inches higher could have broken her neck.

So much for horses. Heather started Kindergarten this year, and now makes the distinction between reading a book and memorizing it; the latter is easier for her than the former. Margaret turned two in October and has mastered complete sentences, after a fashion - nouns, verbs and objects, at least. She has all of the vowels and a majority of the consonants down pat. We have

hopes for the rest of the letters, plus articles and some pronouns besides "me".

Speaking of books, I thought I'd list some of our favorites for you who have kids in our age bracket. The children's sections in most public libraries don't rate the authors, and we're always looking for suggestions. Wallace Tripp gets five stars from both Heather and me, particularly "A Great Big Ugly Man Came Up And Tied His Horse To Me" and "Grandfa Grigg Had a Pig" ("Grandfa", not "Grandpa"). We all enjoy Steven Kellogg too, especially "The Boy Who Was Followed Home" and "The Mysterious Tadpole".

I've read that parents tend to like clever story lines with simple, elegant, illustrations; children like clever story lines with intensely detailed illustrations. The book I remember best from my preliterate days involved brown furry creatures - monkeys or bears - and had a hundred or so on each page, one with a different expression than the rest. Both Tripp and Kellogg put lots of little things in their pictures; Mr. Tripp's are funnier.

(Actual Holiday letter, posted on a Web site, 2004)