

stranger in John Foyster
stranger lands GUFF 1979

Illustrated by Elizabeth Darling

Two Daze In London

Arrival

The 'plane touched down on Airstrip One just about on time — 7 a.m. It took an hour to get through all the formalities at the airport, but 55 minutes of that time were spent waiting for the luggage to appear.

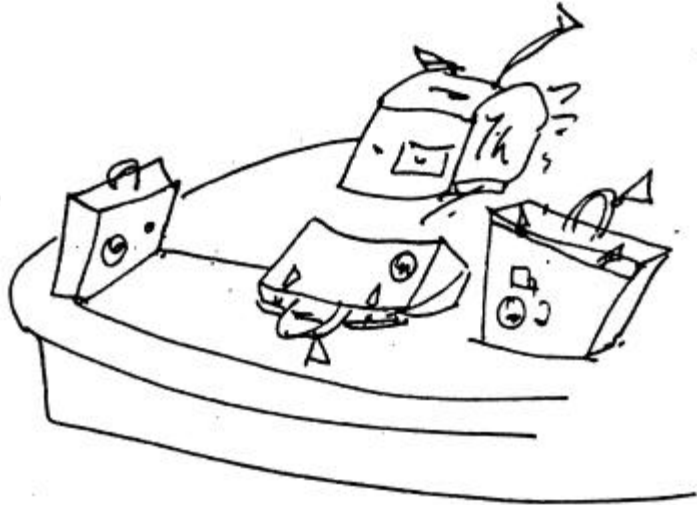
I had thoughtfully donned shirt and tie in an attempt to minimise any delays with customs or immigration, but this sartorial elegance had no effect on the 'slow luggage' problem at all.

I have thought about the reasons for this quite a bit since and, in the manner of those inclined to self-criticism, have decided that I did not try hard enough. Perhaps, I now think, if I had worn a *polka-dotted* tie with a *striped* shirt...



The otherwise aimless moments were enlivened by the mounting prospect of substantial damage to our bags. As we looked on forlornly a

seemingly endless parade of once-proud travel equipment, now reduced to odd-shaped pieces of cloth, leather, and plastic streamed by, looking for all the world like the output from an FAQ



mincing machine.

I felt things were not going to be too pleasant when our remnants appeared, for with my now-all-too-obviously unjustified optimism I had bought cheap and lightweight pseudo-leather (but real plastic) overnight bags. When eventually our bags did appear it seemed at first sight that we might not have done so badly, for the only

damage appeared to be that one handle on one bag had torn loose.

However, as I picked up that bag by the remaining handle the quiet of Heathrow was shattered by the roar of that poor handle tearing loose from the bag, leaving an unsightly pile of plastic and clothing to be dragged past the smiling customs officials.

No more tragedies — just a parade past the hordes of onlookers, until a strangely short-haired Chris Priest strode forward from the end of the tunnel of flesh to grasp my hand.

Then he turned to Jenny and grappled with her enthusiastically.

He took us back to the other people who were waiting — Randal Flynn and Robert Sheckley.



Randal Flynn was the first in a longish list of Australians with whom I renewed acquaintance on this trip. I hadn't known Randal at all well in Australia, but I was to

see him fairly frequently on this trip. He had thoughtfully written to me about my visit, and what to expect, especially in terms of the cost of living. ‘Think of pounds as being dollars and you won't go far wrong’, he suggested. His predictions proved to be remarkably accurate.

Robert Sheckley!

Robert Sheckley! Here was an encounter with a hero of my youth: indeed, Sheckley had had a story in the very first science fiction magazine I ever read (the January 1955 *Galaxy* — in the British edition (number 27) of course). I still remember that story in a vaguely warm way.

More than that: he was the author of some rather deft and very funny short stories in the middle fifties which I admired, if anything, a little too much. As a matter of fact I recall with horror that late in my secondary school education, faced with a rather cretinous series of essay topics in an examination, I had rather desperately knocked out a thousand-word Sheckley pastiche which, so far as the markers were concerned, was more



than passable. What else can you do with a subject like ‘The Happiest Day’?

But late in the fifties — perhaps around the time of *The Journey of Joenes* — Sheckley lost me.

To be a little more honest about it, I suppose I lost him, since that was the time when my interest in science fiction first hit a trough.

Since then I've not been able to get back to his writing. People have suggested to me that I'm missing something.

Sheckley, it soon became clear, was not well. He had just arrived from New York and was really tired. He sat with us while we had a light breakfast and then headed off for his club to sleep.

That breakfast was an occasion at which I should have been listening rather more carefully than I did.

Chris and Randal provided a briefing on organisations of such worldshaking importance as the Astral League and the Jacqueline Lichtenberg Appreciation Society.

The main message I could make sense of was that some of the British fans most worth meeting and knowing were not exactly outgoing. This should have been taken as helpful advice on which I would act, since I am myself a founding member of the Anti-Gregarious Society.

But the best I could do was come up with the suggestion that I should pretend to be talking to computer salesmen, a class of people I regard as marginally more socially desirable than insurance salesmen — but far above politicians, of course. (This is a Woody Allen reference.)

For some reason Chris was mildly amused by, but not at all enthusiastic about, this suggestion.

The breakfast proved to be about as expensive as Randal's model of international finance predicted.

We were a little relieved to be escorted out to Chris's Morris Clubman — an excellent car, but not overly capacious for four people as they begin to exchange and read fanzines. (Even the driver!)

We set off down what proved to be, after some signs of uncertainty on the part of the driver, the correct motorway.

By now Chris was relaxed enough to begin to unburden himself on more serious matters, such as his great ambition to play as an honorary Australian in the UK vs Australia cricket match which had been scheduled for some unspecified time at Brighton.



Cricket, Etc.

Since someone had muttered that I was supposed to be captain of the Australian team I took it upon myself to explain to him that, apart from the

difficulties in connection with establishing residence for the required period, he would have to turn out for all practice sessions, pass a fitness test, and then face the selection panel.

(Given what actually happened in this match, this appears to have been a highly fantastic discussion. Most of the Australians at Brighton failed the fitness test — getting out of bed in time to play — and Chris need not have spent so much time sulking in the bar.)

He was rather crestfallen, but I could not honestly have encouraged his hopes of an easy fannish immortality.

I don't remember much of the drive to London. Views from motorways are rarely inspiring, but what we could see was sufficiently different from the Australian countryside to keep us awake.

It was at about this point on the trip, I feel sure, that I first became aware that my travels were going to have an unexpected focus — upon architecture. From the car I spotted an odd pair of two-storeyed houses — odd to me because, for the upper storey, in place of the conventional sort of windows used on the lower floor, was a vast, almost frameless, window consisting of a square

surmounted by a semi-circle, with the semi-circle rearing up above the ceiling level. The light inside must have been magnificent.

But there were also more practical matters to be considered. Randal and I got into a discussion on the availability of Vegemite in the UK and this sparked off in Chris the notion that we should see Earls Court, or at least pass through it.

As it turned out, Randal hadn't yet been there either. It was possible that there we might come upon a fugitive jar or two of the ambrosial yeast-derivative. No luck, but Randal thought he knew where some lurked.



Thereafter we were driven along the Thames past such architectural splendors as the Battersea Power Station, where the intellectuals in the car

began talking about art deco, while all I could think of was *Things To Come*, a film I had not actually seen.

The Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey were the last delights we saw before Chris got serious about Destinations. We managed to take a couple of photos there, and were enchanted by a sign placed at one entrance to the Houses of Parliament which read 'Peers Only', leaving itself open to more interpretations than I have time or space for here.



Then we dropped Randal off near his place of employment, and headed for Great Russell Street, the address Robin Johnson had given us for the quaintly (but we hoped appropriately) named hotel into which he had booked us — the Economy Hotel.

Where to stay?

There is no Economy Hotel in Great Russell Street.

This we established in the hardest and most empirical possible way, that is, driving along peering anxiously at strange looming buildings which reminded me of Paul Anderson or Bruce Gillespie turned to stone.

My agile mind quickly produced a solution to our problem — we would park the car, find a telephone, and I would ring QANTAS who, since they had actually made the booking on Robin's instructions, would immediately direct us to the accommodation which had been arranged.

This chain of thought might make sense in Australia, but it did not work out quite so well in London, and this was perhaps my first charge of culture shock.

In the first place, parking a car is not quite so straightforward in London as it is in Melbourne. Chris did manage it, however. He also explained the complicated rigmarole through which we must go with our luggage so that no suspicious bomb-like objects would be apparent to passers-by.

In the second place, while finding a telephone wasn't terribly difficult, thanks to the ingenuity and savvy of Chris Priest, finding one which worked was. The third one I tried did provide my fumbling fingers with only minor mechanical problems before I/we got through to QANTAS. ('We' because this was a joint endeavour, involving trying telephones on several levels in one building.)

In the third place — well, the bare facts of the matter are that after only five minutes QANTAS was able to establish to its own satisfaction and mine that we existed, and what is more, that we had flight bookings somewhere on their computer files.



Then, only a minute or two later, I was assured that a booking for us had been made at the Mitre Hotel in Great Russell Street.

You can be sure that our studies of Great Russell Street in the search for the 'Economy Hotel' had not been wasted, and we thought

ourselves to be pretty expert on the subject of what hotels are and are not in Great Russell Street. You will also be unsurprised at our tentative decision. There is no Mitre Hotel in Great Russell Street.

That being the consensus, I thought it was pretty fair to ask QANTAS the exact address of the Mitre Hotel into which we had been booked. For a further two minutes the entire efforts of a mighty international airline were directed towards solving that problem.

In the same period we made some progress as well. Telephone directories being even rarer than functioning telephones in London, it took a great deal of running about, but we found one, and from it established what you will have already guessed — the London Telephone Directory did not list any Mitre Hotel in Great Russell Street.

The two minutes ended with the voice of the QANTAS lady solemnly informing me that while they in London did not actually have the address of this London hotel, if I had any difficulty — any difficulty whatsoever — in locating it I should ring again and they would be only too pleased to telephone Sydney, Australia, where the details

would certainly be available. I thanked her and replaced the telephone handpiece. Calmly.

Clearly it was time for a cortico–thalamic pause — or something of similar efficacy — and one of the advantages of having a science fiction writer in the room is that as a class science fiction writers are even faster on these things than are fans: Chris Priest had looked very hard for the Mitre Hotel, Great Russell Street, so this made it relatively easy for him to urge on me the fact that there was, in Sussex Gardens, an area of London renowned for its cheap accommodation, a Mitre House Hotel which would be worth trying.

I rang and, although they did not have a booking for us (last, fond hope!), they did have rooms available.

Chris drove us out to Sussex Gardens where we were almost booked into a double room with breakfast and bath for £15 plus VAT. Indeed, just as soon as the room had been cleaned we would be able to put our bags in the room. But for now we could leave them in the foyer, and if we would come back in a couple of hours...

At Chris's instigation the three of us went for a walk in the park — which happened to be Hyde Park.

We loitered palely by the Serpentine. Once again there was a new experience for me.

The overcast sky was associated with a kind of weather we simply don't have in Melbourne. There, that particular combination of temperature and cloud would have been accompanied by an unpleasant humidity, but here one could only describe the atmosphere as 'light'.

The Serpentine itself, with a few boats skating



on its mirrored surface as a result of the apparently effortless strokes of casual rowers, reminded me of several Northern Hemisphere paintings (both European and North American) in which the morning light, with contrasts so low that shadows only flicker occasionally into one's perceptions, makes everything still, contrary to the obvious motion of the boats. And there is an impression of intense, suffused light, yet the light-level is actually quite low.

I suppose that the lack of contrast multiplies the effect, but whatever the explanation I did have the feeling that I was looking at a vast

fluorescent screen. Only someone who has experienced the morning light in a typical Australian environment, whether city or country, with its strong contrasts, can appreciate just how alien it all was.

Tax

This charming scene was disturbed only by two people arguing about the relative merits of sales tax and income tax.

Actually Chris and I were agreed that VAT, as a consumer tax, was probably a good thing, or at least a better thing that almost all of the alternatives. My objection was only, as it had been the United States a few years earlier, to the way in which prices are publicly represented to potential customers (i.e. before VAT).

As the person about to reach into the pocket, I am little interested in knowing how much of the money I pay goes direct to the government as a consumer tax, at least in comparison with knowing how much to give the seller. There isn't a universal rule about this sort of thing, naturally, with the result that the buyer not only has to be

prepared for the usual range of scams, but also for whether or not tax has already been paid.



We had drinks in a cafe by the Serpentine, paying prices most appropriately described as overwhelming. To tell the truth I didn't have to worry too much as, for some reason, Jennifer and Chris split the bill between them.

The extended and wandering conversation had by now descended from the heights of VAT and touched upon many matters including, I seem to recall, science fiction.

Now Chris had some other matters to attend to that afternoon, so he escorted us back to our hotel via Speakers' Corner, passing as many

attractive buildings as he could recall lay between us and our destination. We placed our bags in the room and looked around. Hmm.

My travelling experience is pretty limited — especially with respect to any range of accommodation. Outside of science fiction conventions I've only ever had to choose accommodation in a far-off place once or twice.

Science fiction conventions in Australia tend to be in middle-of-the-road hotels (which can be awkward at times), and my various employers have tended to make my accommodation decisions for me simply by the amount of money they allocate for that purpose.

On this occasion both choice and finance were our own responsibility, and I had been a little apprehensive as to how it would all turn out. This wasn't a bad start.

It was more than we were to pay anywhere else, but it had the essentials — a couple of beds, cupboards, lights that worked most of the time. The fire alarms didn't go off very often, and the fact that the room was very dark didn't matter too much, though I suppose that had I been the sort of person who uses a razor I would have had trouble picking out which spots to shave.

There was a lightwell which provided some illumination, but the view could not be recommended. Yet it was towards the back of the hotel, making it pleasantly quiet.

Food

By now it was around 12.30 pm and Chris thought he might as well have some lunch with us before leaving. He knew a small restaurant in the area, and guided us past the cafe/milk bar where we'd briefly refreshed ourselves on the way to the park, past a newsagent laden with all sorts of goodies and most especially street atlases (see below), to a corner from which we could see Paddington Station, and around the corner to the entrance to an Italian restaurant which seemed, so far as quality and price were concerned, parallel with those in Lygon Street, Carlton, back in Australia.



It was delightful (lasagne of monumental size) and I even remembered to work out what the price was in dollars (later I neglected to do this, and so lost track of what the trip was costing), but by this time Jennifer was looking quite tired, and I wasn't in much better shape myself.

Chris returned to Harrow, and Jennifer and I walked back to our hotel. She went to bed (she had arranged to go to a concert that night) and I thought for a bit and then telephoned Mervyn Binns at his hotel (which had been the site of the 1965 Worldcon: poor Mervyn — his first day in London and already he was 14 years behind the times).

Mervyn sounded a bit tired too, but said he wouldn't mind seeing me.

He also mentioned that Robin Johnson would be calling around shortly. Well, I felt that I wouldn't mind discussing the theory and practice of the art of reservation of hotel rooms with Robin, so I decided to drop around to the Mount Royal.

Walking, London, More Walking

But first, a necessary purchase. As intimated



above, I collect street atlases. One reason for this is that I like to know where I'm going.

More honestly, I have to admit that back in 1974, on my first overseas trip, I found myself having to travel a considerable

distance in a strange city (Wellington, New Zealand) without any map at all, and I have always recalled that experience as being thrilling but somewhat uncomfortable. (I remedied the situation quickly in 1974, and still have a Wellington Street Atlas.)

The newsagent we had passed had had a fair selection of the things, but not the one Chris had kindly recommended. The hell with perfection — I needed one to find Merv Binns. Having bought one I quickly checked where Chris Priest lived.

Bloody Hell! Chris lived on the edge of the map.

To the Mount Royal, where Mervyn Binns was Not Happy.

Somehow, while in the United States, he had managed to do so much walking that he feet were now much more blistered and sore than anyone facing a world science fiction convention and a second trip through the United States would like. He wasn't looking forward to it all, to put it mildly.



Robin Johnson had arrived and then stepped out for a while, so I sat talking to Mervyn for a while (or rather, to be honest, listening to his Tales of Sore Feet) and taking notes on how the other half lives — television set and refrigerator, no less. We talked about our respective adventures so far: we were both tired and by no means sure we would be in good shape for SEACON.

Mervyn had been able to do some work for the shop (the late lamented Space Age Books) on his way through the United States, but there was still

a great deal to be done on the way back, as well as another convention to attend.

The other problem was that unless his feet healed quickly he wouldn't be able to get around London to all the places he felt he should visit. We also discussed Robin Johnson's prowess as an organizer of hotel rooms, with both of us looking forward to the confrontation with the swine, and to his grovelling explanation of his villainous performance on behalf of Bryce and Foyster.

At last Robin appeared, and was not at all nonplussed by my tale of woe about non-existent hotels. 'Oh,' he said, 'I suspect the hotel in Sussex Gardens was the one I wanted you booked into.' Somehow the fact that the Mitre House Hotel had no booking for us had escaped his attention.

We talked for a while about our immediate plans in the vague desultory fashion for which Melbourne fans are well-known. Robin



produced his latest toy, picked up in Singapore — a calculator with an inbuilt timer/alarm, the alarm consisting of a tune of half a dozen notes. Robin played a couple of tunes for us, but we really couldn't see how the available variations could fill in the whole afternoon. Some other form of entertainment was called for.

Robin eventually proposed, and Mervyn and I accepted, that we should accept a lift with Robin in 'his' car and check out the stfnal bookshops. I hadn't seen these before, so my interest in FORBIDDEN PLANET and DARK THEY WERE AND GOLDEN-EYED was probably much greater than that of either Robin or Mervyn.

I didn't buy anything in either of these shops on that first day, but I was to spend a pretty penny in them before the trip was over. As I might have expected the basic stock in these shops wasn't too exciting: in each case it was the specialities of the house which made the visits interesting — back issues of magazines, French comic books, and so on.

It was the sort of stuff SPACE AGE BOOKS used to have — but rather more of it. FORBIDDEN PLANET was the smaller of the two shops, and was located in Denmark Street near

the edge of Soho. The neat window display gave considerable emphasis to forthcoming autographing sessions by Famous Science Fiction Authors such as J. G. Ballard.

DARK THEY WERE AND GOLDEN-EYED I visited quite often while I was in London. The stock, spread over two levels, was better than that of FORBIDDEN PLANET, though there were rather too many comic books for my liking (... taking up valuable space...).

Our other interests that afternoon were food and costumes. The Australian fans, or at least some of them, were doing a group thing at the convention, based on various characters out of Cordwainer Smith, and we had spent a lot of time during the last weeks in Australia trying on the costumes which John Breden had designed and Minnie Hands had made.



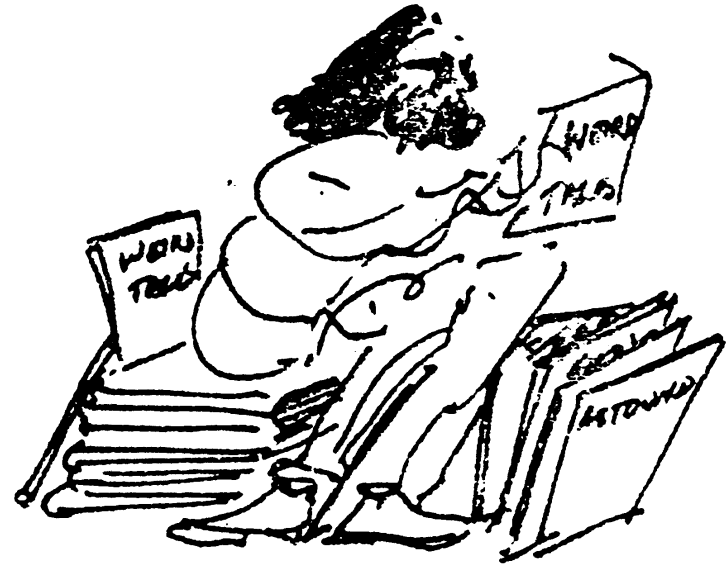
Most of us had had to cart our costumes around the world, but there were still bits and pieces to be hired in London. As well as that, Robin Johnson was to-ing and fro-ing on the question of a costume for himself. In the long run, although he investigated two shops fairly thoroughly, Robin did not take a costume.

As for Mervyn, he had ordered a couple of sets of centurion's gear from a particular shop, and that was where we started the afternoon's work. There were rather more hemmings and hawings than I would have expected when a captain of industry like Mervyn is negotiating, but eventually we tore ourselves from the Miss Piggy

masks and other detritus of television and shuffled out onto the streets of Soho.

At this point neither Mervyn nor Robin had stilled their perverse interests in costumes, so we mooched around the area looking for alternative sources. There were a few such shops, but none which interested me.

On the other hand there was a shop which sold second-hand magazines of a pseudo-scientific nature, and I spent quite some time there with either Mervyn or Robin in attendance while the other member of the trio continued in search of costumery.



Now this was the kind of shop which only displays prices on the items you don't want, like British reprint editions of *Planet Stories*. Mervyn's comments about the prices on the old fillum magazines suggested to me that the prices on the unlabelled items would be rather high.

Our interest now turned to food. Food itself was not a problem, but drink was. Mervyn and Robin both wanted alcohol with their light snacks, but we had chosen — as is all too easy to do in the UK — to eat at one of those times of the

day when, according to the sensible, but incomprehensible to Australians, customs of the land, the pubs are closed. And the cafes don't serve booze then either.

We did pay, however, a fortune for the healthily warm Coca-Colas we did get. Sitting down then did give us a chance to talk seriously about what we would be doing over the next few days.



Robin seemed determined to fit in an immense amount of activity before SEACON, while Mervyn and I were more modest.

It was now quite late in the afternoon, and Jennifer was going out to her concert fairly early that evening — and my job was to wake her in time for it. So I was rather anxious to get back to

Sussex Gardens to make sure that she got on her way in time.

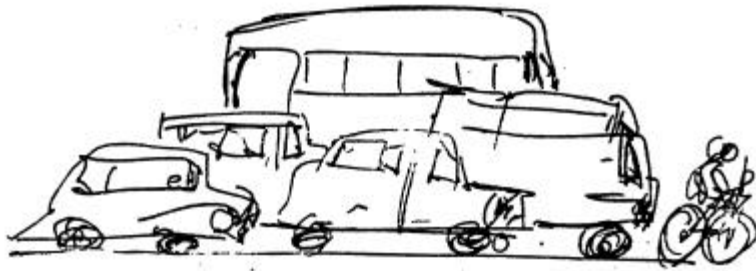
Robin offered to drive us back to our respective hotels. Now in my GUFF platform I had included a line to the effect that I loathed motor cars. This was no joke.

I genuinely do not like motor cars, and travelling in one is even more painful. So travelling back with Robin would be a slow and excruciating experience.

I am never happy in cars, and here I was in a strange city being driven about by someone whose driving style I had not previously experienced!

The traffic was heavy. Eventually I was to learn that in London everything on the road moves slowly — that's why they have an underground — but this first exposure was a shock. (Our morning arrival had been so early that there had been no sign of anything untoward — beyond the usual...)

Robin, as always, was far more patient than I could ever be, and after following a tangled path we reached Sussex Gardens and the Mitre House Hotel.



Jennifer was only just awake, but I managed to hustle her off to her concert at the Queen Elizabeth Hall.

‘Now’ I thought ‘I shall get on with the business of making notes and preparing drafts for my trip report.’

‘On second thought’ I added almost as an afterthought ‘I’ve been on my feet for a long time and it is now 6.30 p.m. I shall follow a prudent course and lie down on this bed for a few seconds.’



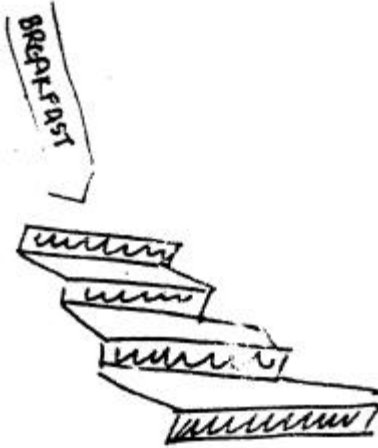
I woke at 3 a.m. on Tuesday morning. Fortunately or unfortunately Jennifer woke at the same time, so we had breakfast or dinner — something — and went back to sleep.

As it turned out, Tuesday turned out to be the day we really did a lot of walking.

Our major responsibility, if we could be said to have had one, was to try to recover from the air travel. But we were also meeting Jennifer's sister, who worked in Lime Street, for lunch, and in the evening we would be going out to meet a few people.

The *first* responsibility, however, was to become acquainted with breakfast, and breakfast

rooms. Neither of us usually pays much attention to this particular custom, but over the next few weeks breakfast became an important ritual.



In the Mitre House Hotel the breakfast room is in a basement (and basements are things we don't have too many of in Australia) and it took us quite a while to find our way into it.

Our fellow guests seemed to fall into two groups, I thought. There were foreigners like us who either could not afford a fancy expensive hotel or preferred not to put up with one, and there were the visitors to London from the surrounding countryside who apparently also couldn't afford the big splurge and didn't have

any friends or relatives they could stay with in the big smoke.

Organization and service at the hotel were pretty minimal but nevertheless friendly, and I feel we could have survived there quite happily during a lengthy stay in London, except for the bills. I suppose that by UK standards the bills weren't high, but the amount of competition in the area might have been expected to force them down a notch or two.



Because we were relatively unfamiliar with breakfast, we were able to treat such commonplaces as eggs and bacon and toast as genuine novelties. I suspect that I may even have drunk some of the coffee — though not much of it, and that heavily charged with sugar.



After breakfast we did have to solve another small problem — that of Jennifer's oboe practice. On the previous day it had seemed to both of us that it would be appropriate and sensible to try Hyde Park as a practice room, so after I had walked around the corner to buy a newspaper or two we set off for the short walk to the park.

The morning traffic was heavy as Londoners were in various stages of arriving at work, but there were also many people walking — I suspect

on their way to work rather than for pleasure, if the briskness of the gait is any measure.

Finding a satisfactory spot in Hyde Park proved more difficult than we had expected, probably because we were seeking a compromise between an understandable desire to be seated and an equally understandable desire to be somewhere relatively private. Eventually we settled for a wooden seat in rickety condition and some twenty metres from the nearest path.

We had passed, on the way, some horses being exercised on a tan, but now the nearest living beings were sufficiently far away to neither disturb nor be disturbed. An occasional briefcase-clutching, white-shirted office worker did stride past on the path, but neither gaze nor attention was distracted by the strange noises.



Now oboes are sensitive instruments. It is by no means impossible for the wood from which they are made to crack as a consequence of the kind of temperature change we had experienced in travelling to the Northern Hemisphere. And Jennifer's reeds were rather dried out.

But after a few minutes' work she was able to begin practising. I took a couple of photographs of her and then began reading the newspapers.

The photographs confirm my memory of that morning.

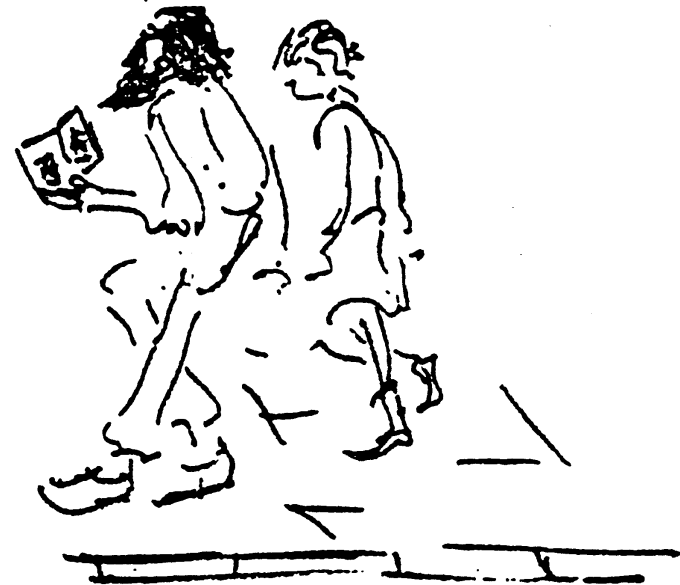
It was less hazy than the previous day had been, but although there is blue in the sky it isn't the intense blue I can see in Australia just by looking out the window. And the grass is certainly greener — or differently green — than would be the case in Australia towards the end of summer, and although everyone knows about these things, it is still a shock to see trees whose green doesn't have that touch of blue-grey so characteristic of Australian trees.

We can manage, I think, the large changes in a new environment because we expect such things: it is the minor ones, at first unnoticed, which prove most unsettling. (Another example: I didn't find traffic in the United States nearly as odd as traffic in the United Kingdom.)

Jennifer practised for about three-quarters of an hour, but the wind was a little strong, and perhaps she was a little too ambitious anyway, expecting to do so much straight away, so we packed up and went back to the hotel.

I thought we could walk to Lime Street, so we set off along Sussex Gardens to Edgware Road, then down to Oxford Street, and so eventually to Soho and Charing Cross Road. I showed Jennifer DARK THEY WERE AND GOLDEN-EYED, and

then we went to Foyle's, where I hoped to pursue my interest in travel books — in particular Nagel's Guides.



Fortunately Foyle's didn't have in stock any that I wanted, but we did buy a couple of maps, including one I especially wanted: the FALK plan of Vienna. The FALK style, which delicately compromises between utility and ungainliness, is the most useful I've ever seen: you can convert it

from a pocket-size reference to a wall map with great ease.

We now pressed on towards Lime Street, but two things began to dawn on us. First, we had committed ourselves to a lot of walking. It hadn't looked very far on the map, but in reality...



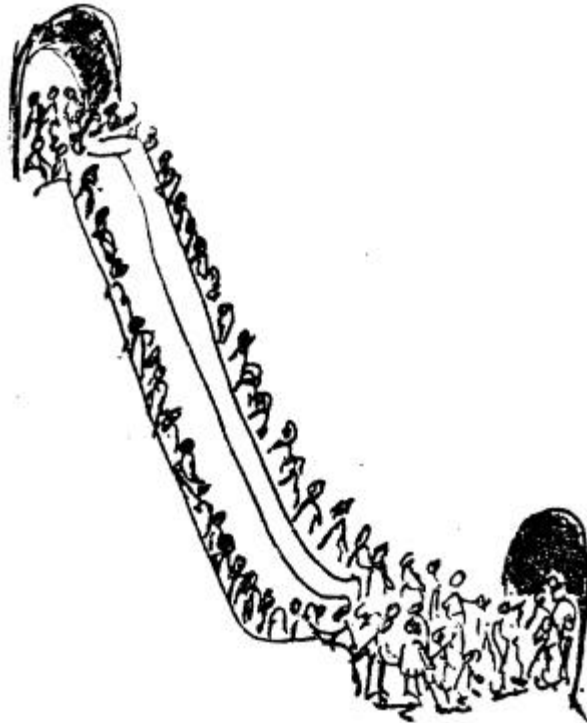
Second, everyone else in London seemed to be out walking too.

After the shock of the motor traffic the previous day the crowded pavements probably should not have been a surprise, but they were. I don't believe that either of us ever got used to the number and density of the pedestrians in London.

We didn't just get tired from all this — it began to look as though we wouldn't be able to meet sister Barbara on time, and she had a short lunch break. Both of us were pleased to be able to take the tube from Holborn to Bank — my first ride on the London underground!

The London underground is at once frustrating and facilitating, expensive and indispensable. No single characterization is suitable. There were times when we found travel on it fast and efficient. At other times it was maddeningly slow. Often crowded, but sometimes almost deserted, it became of major importance to us strangers as the fastest way around in a new city.

What was consistent was the high price. But if the price was high it was also — most of the time — reasonable in terms of the kind of service it provided.



But on this particular occasion it got us there on time and so, clutching maps and a couple of fanzines I just happened to have bought on the way, we met up with Barbara and went to a crowded pub, The Bull's Head, for lunch.

It was at this point that the differences in the ways living spaces may be used began to be brought home to us very strongly. Visitors to

Melbourne remark upon the wide streets: now we felt quite the opposite.



It is true that the area around Bank is rather old and crowded, but at times we now felt rather as though we were in a doll's house. This impression was strengthened in The Bull's Head which, though it served reasonable food, wasn't exactly palatial.

It was spread over several floors but none of the rooms seemed capable of holding much more than a dozen people.

Standing up.

Some people might see that as cosy, but not me.

We sat near a window and while I ate some rather ordinary pâté. I thought back to the lunch

on the previous day which could have taken place in Melbourne. How thoughtful Chris had been to break it to us gently!

Eventually Barbara had to get back to work, and we had to return to our hotel. This we did by the usual combination — now — of foot and underground.

We called in at Selfridge's because I needed a ribbon for the Norstrilia group costumes and they had, as predicted, a huge range which made selection almost an embarrassment.

When we got back to the hotel Jennifer arranged to do some more oboe practice in the hotel's breakfast room and I, with my eye quite obviously straining to detect what remained of the original plan for that day instead of concentrating on recovering from the trip, decided to walk around the neighbourhood again.



Sussex Gardens is itself a street full of hotels. Starting just south of Paddington Station, it curves around to the north-east until, crossing Edgware Road, it becomes Old Marylebone Road and then terminates at Marylebone. The street 'Sussex Gardens' actually acquires that name only as it crosses Westbourne Terrace, where its origin is marked by a small wrought-iron fenced park, triangular in shape and useful only in providing a concentration of green and a break from the relentless colonnade of hotel facades which bears down upon the pedestrian brave enough to walk the length of the street.

If you stand at the beginning, on the south side, and look along the pavement to the north-east, the contrast of impressions is quite

overwhelming. If you consider any single building on that southern side it has, by comparison with buildings in Australia, considerable elegance. Well-kept, it typically has white-painted ornamentation which is neither ostentatious nor modest.

But the word which hurts is 'typically'.

For as you stand on the pavement you see a line of identical buildings, so far as the eye can distinguish them — perhaps fifteen or twenty in all. Outside them, on the pavement, small cars are parked on both sides of a narrow service road after which, crossing a plantation of English trees I didn't recognize then and am equally incompetent to handle now, you come to the road proper.

Singly those buildings are fine, but in a mass they seem to lose whatever charm they may have had. Further along Sussex Gardens, especially on the northern side, they weren't even individually attractive. But even early in the walk (before London Street, say) the buildings are less elegant on the northern side — lacking pillars, for example.

The Mitre House Hotel is on the northern side. As you go north and east the buildings

become almost stark. When we moved around the Sussex Gardens area, though, it was far more often a matter of heading towards Paddington Station and Praed Street, either along London Street or along Spring Street.

Spring Street had the Post Office in it — and telephones outside it — so we went that way reasonably often. But London Street has its attractions, too, as a way to walk along, such as a branch of the National Westminster Bank — which we also needed to visit.

The buildings in Spring Street were probably slightly more elegant — fewer shops — but there wasn't really much to choose between them. And by the time you got to Praed Street, you were effectively in a shopping centre anyway.

At either junction, of course, the roof of Paddington Station dominated the scene. It was here that I went to buy a copy of the British Rail timetable. (Yes, timetables as well as street atlases.)

I've always felt more comfortable, when arguing with ticket sellers or others, when I have had a timetable in my hands, but the BritRail job is not exactly portable. (I wonder what Chris

Priest did with it after we left? Use it to schedule his toy train?)



Praed Street is a curious mélange of shops, mostly seedy — such as the Indonesian restaurant where we ate some satays that evening.

But if you walk north–east along Praed Street then on the northern side you do eventually reach The Grand Junction Arms, a delicate–looking pub on a triangular block of land. It's tiny, and probably not much to get excited about on the inside, but to anyone walking along Praed Street its striking contrast with its surroundings is a pleasant relief.



This particular afternoon I walked along Praed Street to Edgware Road — just getting a feel for the neighbourhood, which I suppose seems rather strange, given that in just over twenty–four hours we would be leaving the area. But perhaps the neighbourhood I was trying to get a feel for was England, rather than just a few streets.

As I walked along I checked the price of film for my camera: I kept hoping for a bargain but I didn't find, I have to confess, even one. But it was on this walk that I learned that 'turf accountant'

is not just a product of Bill Tidy's fertile imagination.



At the Edgware Road intersection, which appears to have been blessed with every inconvenience town planners can dream up for large intersections, I came as close as I ever expect to do to entering a Marks and Spencer Store, for one lay on the corner opposite the one on which I stood. I took a couple of photos to remind myself that I had been there, and set off down Edgware Road to Sussex Gardens, a walk which is wholly unremarkable, and turned for home along Sussex Gardens, where the monotony of that boring parade of hotels was occasionally broken on the southern side by something I didn't understand.

Blocks of flats I did recognize and understand, and it was while walking along here that I first consciously noticed a London bus.



And then there was the pub at the corner of Southwick Street labelled 'Monkey Puzzle', which had me puzzled until much later, back in Australia, I realized that the name must have

come from a tree growing in the area, a variety of *Araucaria*.

At the end of the walk I was slightly tired, but felt comfortable with the neighbourhood. The day had been pleasantly warm, and I looked forward to the evening out.

Douglas Adams

At 7.30 p.m. Chris Priest picked us up in his car, and drove us over to Chris Evans's place in Chiswick, with just that touch of uncertainty in his navigation which disconcerts but does not alarm. Randal Flynn was staying with Chris at the time, and we were all going to meet Douglas Adams at a pub by the Thames.

Randal is well-known to many Australian fans, but Chris Evans (not the Late Doctor) couldn't be described adequately by anyone other than Chris Evans himself. His first novel, *Capella's Golden Eyes*, was published by Faber in 1980, and it may give readers some idea of what Chris is like, but it will be a poor substitute for an evening with Chris Evans. Several times in England we were lucky enough to spend some time with Chris, and his sparkling conversation

was always a startling joy. No matter how much we felt we had come to know him he always managed to unfold something new and inventive. In writing so much about Evans I might seem to be slighting the others, but it is rare to find someone whose imagination is so dominating. (People who try to dominate by force of personality are dime a dozen — and a different matter altogether.)

The plan was for us to walk to The Black Lion. Everyone else, in this balmy weather, put on sweaters. I knew better, of course. Unaccustomed to English evenings, and only just recovered from a cold in Australia, I knew that I would not need a sweater as we walked along beside the river...

It was a pleasant walk, too, for the five of us. The river was very low, making it almost possible to compare it unfavourably with Melbourne's Yarra, and the twilight encouraged a good deal of loitering. Chris Priest speculated on whether or not we would see the Concorde later that evening, since it passed almost directly overhead at a particular time most nights.

In a desultory fashion we agreed to watch out for it, but I believe that no one did. So much for the sense of wonder.

When we reached The Black Lion we went straight in and got down to the business at hand, completely forgetting the Concorde.

Inside we talked about lots of things. It was one of those 'getting to know you' evenings when anything goes, but at a fairly superficial level. It is helpful, later on, to have this sort of background information, but of itself it has little value.

Partway through the evening the deceptively tall Douglas Adams arrived. I write 'deceptively tall' because, until he stands up, Adams doesn't seem tall — to have any of those facial characteristics, or the bearing, that we usually associate with the tall. He was to be interviewed, at SEACON, by Chris Priest, and they spent most of the evening chatting to one another.

Since I'm not a great absorber of popular culture, I doubt I'd have much to say to the script editor of *Doctor Who* and author of *Hitchhiker's Guide* etc.

Afterwards we walked slowly back to Chris Evans's place. It was now chilly. In fact it was damned cold, and I was envious of those who'd been thoughtful enough to wear sweaters.

Back at Chris's we talked again about all sorts of stuff. I remember particularly defending the

proposition that any writer worth the salt ought, as an exercise, to be able to imitate the style of any given writer (well, at least from amongst those who might be said to have a style). Chris Priest was not enthusiastic about this viewpoint, but he was unable to change my attitude.

Eventually he drove us back to Sussex Gardens. It was 12.30 a.m. and I had, by carefully planned stupidity, managed to catch the cold which was to lay me low for the next day and keep me very quiet through the early days of SEACON.

(The next day — not to be chronicled here or elsewhere — was the day of the cold, the fish and chips, and the Tate. Going to the Tate Gallery late on the Wednesday afternoon was sufficiently mentally stimulating to keep me going for a week, and all I can now say in summary is that in consequence of that visit I now reject utterly the proposition contained in Bob Shaw's memorable line 'He who has a Tate's is lost'.)