

stranger in  
stranger lands

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## **Round England**

Now, the ways that we spent our time, I guess, were therefore the ways you spend time when you are normally at home. In other words, Chris made his flat a kind of second home, and that gave us a chance to settle in, settle down, recover — do all of those important things, such as the dry-cleaning and the laundry — which are difficult to do when you are travelling around at the rate at which we had been travelling. The laundry/dry-cleaning place that we used was about half-way from the railway station at South Harrow up to Chris's place. There's a sort of bend where Norfolk Road turns into Lower Road. Just about at that point there was a laundromat so one could, if one were so inclined, drop the laundry off there on the way to the South Harrow station to go into the city, and pick it up on the way back or, much more commonly, stand there and watch the laundry rotating, as one so often does. But Chris's house was — it's hard to describe — it was sort of in front of and adjacent to one of the cricket grounds used by Harrow — the school. And so there was opportunity to walk around on those grounds, there not being any schoolchildren around (not, at least, at the time we were there). And we did that — it was sunny, it

was pleasant, it was (in a word) a bit like home, because at that stage Jennifer and I were living in St Kilda in Melbourne and in a house that was a similar distance from a similar kind of ground, though not (I must say) a similar kind of school.

The other aspect of life there, of course, was a chance to talk to Chris and other people. Because Chris had been out to Australia in 1977, we knew him moderately well, and it was a good opportunity to get the chance to get to know him better, and to get to know some of his friends (some of whom I've referred to in passing, earlier in this volume). In particular, I recall that at the time I was most impressed with both the writing and the conversation of Christopher Evans. Later, I think, I found Chris Evans' science fiction novels less interesting, but it was at an early stage in his career, and it was quite an opportunity that we had to talk to him.

Another important thing Chris did was to try to introduce us to real food — which in England had been pretty scarce. He took us to a Chinese restaurant which, I'd have to say, was not too bad. The other person who took us out that I particularly recall, was John Brosnan, that famous science fiction writer, and author of the

well-known novel *Echo of Jackboots*. John actually took us to an Indian restaurant at or near his club, and I must say that was pretty good food — for England. (If I criticise English food, it's just a habit I formed.) So we had quite an opportunity to meet up again with John Brosnan, whom we'd known for much longer than we'd known Chris. John Brosnan had been active in Australian fandom since the 1960s and when he moved to England at the time of the famous bus trip, Australian fandom lost one of its most energetic members.

The other side of living in London was that there were chances to see other people, either accidentally or deliberately. Accidentally, indeed, was how we came across Bert Chandler one day. We had no knowledge of whether Bert was still in England. It was quite a surprise, therefore, when we came across him, while walking along near Piccadilly Circus. We were crossing over one side of the street and — lo and behold — there, in a city of millions of people, was someone that we knew from Australia — knew quite well. So the size of the city didn't really constrain us from meeting people.

Another person that we were lucky enough to — well, another friend that we spent some time with in London — was Jennifer's friend Caroline Coffey. Caroline worked at the Courtauld Institute at that time and she had a fairly famous, or perhaps infamous, boss — Sir Anthony Blunt. We went to the Courtauld Institute one day and we walked over the place and thought it was an extremely comfortable place to work. But we couldn't see ourselves getting a job there. And Caroline left the Courtauld Institute not too long after. But it was a different side of living in London, and one which was attractive — as indeed, despite my complaints about food, many aspects of living in London proved to be; I think it was partly because of the warmth of the environment in which we lived.

There were other people that we ran into — sometimes accidentally, as I've said, but also deliberately. I can remember particularly going to listen to Malcolm Edwards at Gollancz where we talked a bit about what future science fiction conventions of the world variety there might be outside of the United States (and North America) in particular. There was a time when we were really enthusiastic to get things rolling and

indeed, obviously since 1970 the frequency with which the world convention has ventured outside the North American continent has been quite substantial. So, in that sense, it was certainly a success — the discussions that we held were consistent with what was ultimately done. Indeed, I was really hoping that Malcolm would stand for GUFF when the return trip occurred. At that stage it would occur in 1981 and, indeed, he did stand; but the limp-wristed Joseph Nicholas was the winner, with long-term consequences for Joseph — and also for Judith Hanna.

Another person I was lucky enough to visit in London was Nick Shears (and his wife Audrey). Nick had been in ANZAPA when he lived in South Africa. He subsequently moved to London and was just integrating himself — or seemed to be integrating himself — with English fandom at the time and it was only just before leaving for Australia that we re-established contact. So it was a matter of shoe-horning a visit to Nick and Audrey into what was already a fairly busy schedule. So I didn't spend as much time with Nick as I would have liked.

But, then, with a trip of this kind, you always say that about a very large number of people. The

opportunity to spend time with people who are your friends — perhaps only by correspondence, but certainly people that you've come to appreciate — is more limited in a trip of this kind than one would anticipate. It's always possible to make a rapid acquaintance with someone, but to really get to spend time with people that you know over a lengthy period is almost impossible. If you spend as much as a day with anyone, you'll be really lucky. Perhaps it's because I'm a bit slow, but I would certainly have preferred to spend more time with people. There were a couple of people that I did really get to spend a decent amount of time with, and certainly the sense of being at home, well, it's more memorable; when you spend more time with someone. But on the other hand you have to balance that against the fact that sometimes it's the fleeting meetings that create the greatest impression — or perhaps have the greatest impact on your life.

Now — as I have indicated above — we spent quite some time at Chris Priest's house, both immediately after the convention (a little bit of time) but then more time after we'd gone to Europe. We also did a little bit of travelling

around that was not connected with fandom, and this was deliberate in a sense, in that Jennifer Bryce was not as closely involved with fandom as I was (although quite closely involved). But she also had non-fan friends, and there was good reason for spending some time with them. It didn't actually amount to very much time at all.

One thing we did just before going to Europe was, stay with Jennifer's sister, who lived in a place called Colne Engaine just out of Colchester. And this Colne Engaine was a tiny, tiny place. Barbara worked in the city, so they drove into Marks Tey each day, and Barb would go and work in London, in the city, as I've described earlier in this report. But then, at night, it was a matter of going back to Colne Engaine. So immediately after the convention we went off with her to Marks Tey where Mike picked us up and drove us to their house in Colne Engaine which was really a farmhouse.

We both had quite severe colds after the convention and so it was a matter of choosing to lie down being sick, holed up like a wounded beast, in Colne Engaine, and annoying Jennifer's sister and brother-in-law — or doing so with

science fiction fans. On balance, it seemed better to annoy one's relatives than one's friends.

Now, Colne Engaine seemed absolutely unremarkable at the time — pleasant, because it was a small village (at no other stage did I really get to a small village in England) — but, apart from that, unremarkable. However, in the intervening years, I've gradually learnt a little bit about that part of England, and I now know that in fact quite a few miles to the north of Colne Engaine, in Norfolk, there was a family of Foysters (from whom I may or may not be descended) who, having started off as peasants in the southern part of Norfolk, gradually began to acquire property until, around about the year 1800, they had acquired farms and other properties over quite a large area of southern Norfolk. And then, round about 1820, the last male member of one branch of that family died, and his properties were passed to a relative. And this relative lived, not at all in Norfolk, but right down to the south, in a town called Halstead, in Essex. And Halstead is about three miles to the west of Colne Engaine. So when I was in Colne Engaine, in 1979, I was actually quite close to the location at which, perhaps some property

transactions concerning my ancestors (or perhaps not my ancestors) were involved. So, England is, indeed, a small place — but that was certainly not something that I'd had in mind.

Now, there were other excursions that Jennifer and I undertook which were not related to science fiction fandom. The first of these was a trip to Cambridge, and that one was balancing a trip that Jennifer had done to Oxford previously. It was just a matter of going to Cambridge for the day from London, and I must say it seemed unremarkable. It doesn't mean that one wouldn't go to Cambridge again, but there was nothing in particular that attracted one about it.

There were two other trips that we took — one short, and the other somewhat longer. The shorter of the two was actually a trip to visit two old friends of ours who were working at Bletchley — you can call it Milton Keynes if you like. But they were friends with whom we'd worked in Melbourne, and they were currently working in England, so it was an opportunity to go and visit them (which we took). We drove around Milton Keynes, which is possibly not one of the most interesting locations in England — except for one aspect of it, which was as we were heading across

a long street in Bletchley going towards Milton Keynes, we stopped for some reason in the road, and I looked around the longish road; there was nothing special about it — until I noticed that its name was Watling Street and then there was that rush of blood to the head that you sometimes have when history comes flooding in. So I really was quite impressed to find myself standing on Watling Street.

And finally there was a longer trip — a full-day trip — to visit a friend with whom Jennifer had been working in one of her positions, in Bristol. Trevor worked at a technical college in Bristol, and so we thought we'd spend the day travelling out there, and there were several things that were quite impressive about that. The fast train was quite reasonable, but Clifton College, which we drove around, seemed quite an interesting place and, of course, when I later discovered that Peter Roberts had been at Clifton College — I immediately recognized the fannish import of it all. We went to Trevor's technical college, which was very much like a technical college in Australia — and something one could take or leave.

But then there were two other things which were far more interesting. One of them was Isambard Kingdom Brunel's suspension bridge over the Avon, which I thought an absolutely wonderful construction, and it certainly changed my whole conception of Brunel and his vision and achievements. I find myself taken back to that time, whenever I think about Bristol; I think about that bridge, and just what was able to be achieved in the nineteenth century. In Australia, of course, such bridges are relatively uncommon. By comparison, for example, the Sydney Harbour Bridge looks like a much easier thing to build — though of course it's much, much bigger. That suspension bridge of Brunel's is just beautiful. The Sydney Harbour Bridge is quite rightly known as 'The Coat-hanger' in Australia because it's very functional — it's not at all beautiful. But Brunel's bridge is beautiful.

The other remarkable thing in Bristol was George's bookstore. I had certainly not gone to Bristol with any intention of buying some, or many, or indeed any, books. However, one gets trapped by these things, and when, while walking innocently around the downtown part of Bristol, one comes across a secondhand bookshop —

naturally, one goes in — and when one goes in, one finds many interesting books (as it happened, none of them science fiction, though I'm quite sure the science fiction that was there was interesting enough). But there were many other books which were rather more interesting, and I only bought one or two, but they were really the sort of things that I would have been very pleased to have found anywhere. And to have found them there was quite pleasant.

And so we turn now to the science fictional side of travelling around England — something which took a while, but not really very long; it was about four days.

As I've indicated above, the notion had been that, by putting in a gap between the convention and when I wanted to see English fans, there would have been some time for the other visitors to have departed. But England was so attractive a place in those days that I'm afraid my goals could not be achieved, and it wasn't always possible to arrange to see people. However, there was quite a nice little itinerary worked out, that enabled me to see people that I knew, or had just met and liked, and also people whom I'd known for a long time.

Now, the trip started off by going out to Reading with Chris Priest to visit and stay overnight with Dave and Hazel Langford, and that we did. It was a very strange gathering, because I had not been to a town the size of Reading, which is a bit puzzling to an Australian, being so close to London and yet being somewhat substantial itself. In some senses, you could construe it as a suburb, but in other ways it's not, and though certainly there are such places now, in and around Melbourne and Sydney, it was something that I was not quite ready for.

An interesting thing about that visit to Dave and Hazel was that it was possible to give some instruction to Dave in certain arcane aspects of the fanzine duplication business. At the time, there was some association between Mr Langford and the Jacqueline Lichtenberg Appreciation Society, and it was necessary to produce certain publications.

The difficulty that I saw from an artistic point of view was that these publications were much too well reproduced. If you are to have science fiction fans, who are the novices, then one of the characteristics of a novice science fiction fan is that he or she (and it's probably he) really can't

manage a duplicator, so if you are attempting to reproduce the works of a neo-fan, generally speaking you shouldn't have a well-written and well-reproduced fanzine. And so I was able to instruct Dave — I'm sure Dave knew about these techniques, but he quite kindly allowed me to think that he was not aware of these techniques — in techniques for making fanzines appear to be very poorly produced.

This I did with some enthusiasm — there are so many ways in which one can turn the handle of the duplicator unevenly, so many ways of smearing ink on the page — and it was quite a joy to resurrect all those sins of my youth and to come up with a properly inky fanzine.

But that was then a visit to someone whom I'd only just met. And the next day was to be a similar adventure, because I was going on to spend the middle of the day with Pam Boal at Wantage, and the way to do that was of course to catch a train which was notionally headed off to Oxford, to disembark from the train at Didcot, and catch a train across to Wantage from there.

Well, catching the train was all right in the morning, but it was pretty cold. It was even colder standing at Didcot waiting for the bus

which was to take me and a few other forlorn customers on to Wantage and other parts at which the bus no doubt called.

The railway station at Didcot had no attractions whatsoever. The most interesting thing one could do was to look across to the cooling towers which were nearby, but that was scarcely attractive either, and so I was extremely relieved to get on to a bus to go into Wantage.

This was a bus which was, I guess, the equivalent of a — well, it was a mail-drop sort of route. So we took back roads — or what seemed to these eyes to be back roads — on the way around to Wantage. The bus was also quite slow. I knew what the timetable said, but I really hadn't anticipated that it would travel as slowly as it did, and it was as a result somewhat tiring. One looked out and one saw fields, one saw hedges, one nodded off, one saw some more fields and hedges, and maybe some trees, and really it wasn't, I thought, the greatest travel. But, in the fulness of time, we pulled up at Wantage, probably ten miles at the most from Didcot, and I found my way around to where Pam lives.

Wantage, of course, is well known for being the birthplace of Alfred the Great. So getting



there was something which was historical, I guess; but Wantage itself is not a large town. I had lunch with Pam, and we talked about science fiction fandom and things, and what we did, and over the years since then we have maintained a desultory correspondence, I suppose, depending mostly on whether I was publishing a fanzine or Pam was publishing a fanzine. But that's the kind of relationship that you have in science fiction fandom, and I guess Pam Boal is one of the people I feel most comfortable with, even though we only exchange words every three or four years.

I had to leave earlier than I wanted to because I had a pretty fair journey ahead of me the rest of that day. It was a matter of getting to Didcot first of all, and then travelling from Didcot down to Exeter, and then from Exeter down to visit Peter Roberts at a place which is spelt `Cockwood'. The train was another one of the fast trains, so it wasn't a long trip by any means. And in the initial stages we passed through what is called the Vale of the White Horse, which is very appropriate, because there is indeed south of the railway line a white horse in chalk (or whatever it is that those things are done in) and from the train one could

see this white horse and — well, there are similar things in Australia, though not as old.

So travelling to Exeter was a matter of nodding off a bit, and occasionally seriously trying to get a bit of sleep as one edged one's way down to Exeter. It was almost as though one was going on for ever along this southern part of England. But, of course, one wasn't — it was no great distance at all — but certainly you felt that you travelled a long way when you travelled down as far as Exeter. And then at Exeter, of course, it was a matter of changing to a smaller train — a much slower train — and there going down on a short trip, only ten minutes really (perhaps, twenty minutes), down to Starcross, and there getting out and seeing again, at last, good old Peter Roberts.

Peter Roberts had taken over from Ron Bennett in the early 1970s as the dispenser of news about fandom in England, and accordingly I had relied upon Peter as a source of information about what was going on in English fandom, right up until the time of this convention.

It was by this time late in the afternoon, and Peter took me, I think, without referring (and this was remiss of him) — without referring to the

nearby enormous atmospheric railway — he took me from Starcross down to Cock'ood (or Cockwood), and as we arrived at Cockwood, Peter explained to me the great deal of trouble he had had, as you might expect, with the locals (him not being a local), and his attempts to pronounce the name of the town in which he lived. He would say, `Cock'ud', and the locals at the pub would say, `No, no, no, you've got it wrong: it's 'Cock'ud'. And Peter would look puzzled — which was appropriate, I suppose.

Anyway, we spent the afternoon talking, and the evening talking, and the next day went for a bit of a walk around the back roads — I think of them in that way — of Cockwood, before I set off on the next stage of my journey, which was to be by far the longest one. And it was a journey that would take me as far north as I would go on this trip. Once again, just as leaving Pam Boal had seemed to be a matter of leaving too soon, so it was that leaving Peter Roberts was something that I hadn't really wanted to do.

We'd known each other for a decade, probably, through correspondence, and here I was, haring off somewhere else, and we'd really only started to get to know each other in person.

Although there'd been some opportunities at Brighton to talk, it's not quite the same as the opportunities you have when you've got a few hours with someone. Of course, sometimes having a few hours with someone is the last thing you want — but I was lucky, because in England that never happened.

So the next morning, which was a Friday, after this invigorating walk around the back-blocks of the metropolis of Cockwood, I set off by train to head north, and my final destination that day was to be Holmes Chapel.

Holmes Chapel was where Eric Bentcliffe currently lived. Eric Bentcliffe was one of the first fans I made contact with in England, after Ken Slater. I made contact with Ron Bennett at about the same time. Eric Bentcliffe was associated with some of the most remarkable fanzines ever published. One hopes that histories of the fanzine will be able to capture some of the spirit of what was there in fanzines such as his — particularly, obviously, *Triode*.

The later issues of *Triode* were so beautifully duplicated that even the highest quality American fanzines probably didn't exceed *Triode* in quality of reproduction. The amount of time that Eric

and his co-editors and writers and illustrators put into *Triode* was almost incalculable. I think 'incalculable' is just the word, because if ever they'd sat down to think about how much time they were putting into producing that fanzine, they would have not done it; they would have stopped. But they didn't. And science fiction fandom was all the luckier that they didn't. What did happen, of course, was that they got older — demands on their time got greater — and they ceased to produce fanzines at that time.

So I was really looking forward to visiting Eric. Of course, one of the reasons why was that I had to change trains at Crewe. And although I suppose there is nothing especially exciting about changing trains at Crewe, I was somewhat (as I still am) — interested in trains, and a large number of train lines intersect at Crewe. The line to Holmes Chapel is, more or less, the line that goes from Crewe direct to Manchester, so it was a matter of getting off a train part-way. The train that took me from Exeter to Crewe was quite large, but the train that took me from Crewe to Holmes Chapel was quite small.

Now, travelling from Exeter to Crewe proved to be remarkably interesting. It proved to be

remarkably interesting for a reason which might almost be said to be science fictional — and this is that, because it was such a long journey, obviously one takes a book to read, but also one spends a fair amount of time looking out the window, hoping to see something interesting. And I did.

As the train travelled along, looking out to the west, I saw a radar dish — a fairly large radar dish — and this seemed interesting to me. There was nothing really near by. But then, quite some miles further along, I saw a second radar dish. And I thought, 'That is odd.' And by the time I saw the third radar dish the penny dropped: I was looking at a long-baseline array. But it wasn't until the following day that I appreciated it all, however.

Changing at Crewe was straightforward (as both earlier and later chapters in this report will attest, I am contentedly familiar with the ways of railways systems) and so, early in the evening, Eric picked me up in his car at Holmes Chapel.

After meeting Eric's wife and daughter I was plunged into the exhausting program Eric had designed.

That night we spent hours going through photo albums and boxes of slides. Although *Triode* has been, as I have said, a wonderful fanzine, it didn't extend to portraits of its contributors, so this was one major source of interest to me. In addition, Eric had amassed quite a collection of photographs from conventions and other gatherings and here, as well, names were more familiar to me than faces. By the end of the night I felt almost overwhelmed by the data input.

The next day, Saturday, proved to be no less interesting; Eric had obviously entertained so many fans over the years that he now knew by instinct what would be of interest to the hasty visitor. What impressed me most was that there was so much within so small a geographical area.

Saturday began with a trip to Sandbach. A few miles to the south of Holmes Chapel, Sandbach has an interesting market-place in which on this Saturday — and perhaps most Saturdays for all I know — there was a fair of the kind perhaps describable as medieval (but not really), with animals roasting on spits and so on. Since Sandbach must actually be quite old (and is described in some tour guides as 'quaint'),

everything seemed to fit together quite nicely. I don't know whether Eric did this deliberately or not, but bringing someone like me from a country in which there is nothing constructed which is older than a couple of centuries to a place with artefacts which are around a thousand years old is like producing and using a time machine. It was a great morning.

And have dealt with a time machine, we now set off for a space machine. All those radar dishes were in fact controlled and managed from Jodrell Bank, which we reached on the road to Manchester slightly to the north of Holmes Chapel. I was so ill-prepared for this travel, in the sense of having studied the terrain, that I had not realised how close Jodrell Bank was to Holmes Chapel.

By the late 1970s Jodrell Bank was beginning to be more significant for its historic contributions to science than its contemporary ones. Nevertheless the opportunity to see that large dish (and of course Australia has similar arrays) was one I relished. But why was it that just about the only souvenir I bought was an Apollo 17 tie? Perhaps I was trying to link two aspects of space exploration?

Eric, of course, had more in store for me. Although geography is scarcely a subject which excites me, there had been no escaping the fact that England looked different from Australia (which I have noted to some extent above), and Eric was about to show me yet another novelty. It meant driving further north towards Manchester.

It also meant, since Eric wasn't going to spoil things by describing too much, a sense of confused anticipation. But eventually we pulled off to the side of the road and, standing on the edge at Alderley Edge, looked north towards Manchester airport.

Partly, of course, my surprise was a result of the fact that I had never before seen this particular topographic phenomenon (I'm sure they must exist in Australia, but not where I've seen them); to stand at the boundary between two level areas of land which are separated vertically by a couple of hundred feet is a bit awe-inspiring. But in addition there was the fact that I was seeing some of England which looked almost — *uncivilised*. It was probably not until then that I realised that just about all of England that I had seen was neatly clipped and in its place; standing on Alderley Edge I found myself surrounded by

vegetation which showed every sign of being there because it wanted to be there, not because it had been put there by a human being.

On the way back to Holmes Chapel Eric pointed out to me the stfnal significance of it all: 'Alan Garner lives around here' he said, and in that way suggested how the writer had drawn the atmosphere of his novels from his own surroundings.

By now it was time to return to London, so Eric drove me back to Crewe; in just 24 hours I had had a crash course in both fandom and science fiction which was as pleasant as it had been surprising.