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THE PUDDING CLUB
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Visiting the Old Country

IN ENGLAND WITH TOM AND SUE BRAKKE

We recently traveled to jolly old England. I was scheduled to speak at a conference there, so it made sense to make a big trip out of it.

Our first stop after dropping things off (and taking a quick nap) at the hotel was the Westfield Stratford City shopping center in suburban London. (No, that's not how we normally roll, but we needed to replace a lost item.) It was a Saturday afternoon, and the place was mobbed. I haven't seen anything like it in the United States for a long time.

I watched people while Sue shopped, and it was clear that the dynamism was driven by diversity. The mix of races and tongues left no doubt that we were in a cosmopolitan place, and the level of activity provided a testament to the economic and cultural power of inclusion.

We then headed into London proper and walked around for a time before taking a river bus up the Thames to the bank opposite our hotel. Then we crossed over via a cable car as the sun set over the city. It was stunning.

For the next few days, we saw little of each other. While I attended the conference from morning until night, Sue mastered the London rail system and visited many of the famous sites. (The Tower of London was her favorite.) The weather was marvelous, so she spent more time outdoors and less in museums than she normally would. And she found her way to the Thames at low tide to scrounge for stuff on the bank. (We all have our patterns.)

The conference was great and my presentation went well for an hour and forty-four minutes. As I answered the last question, I got too close to the edge of the stage and could tell I was losing my footing. Down I went, although I stuck the landing, ending up on my feet on the floor below.

Thankfully, I didn't hurt myself, because the main event of the trip was still ahead. We had booked a self-guided walking tour in

the Cotswolds, a beautiful and charming part of the English countryside. Over three days, we walked twenty-five miles, including some tiring ascents, although the views were rewarding each time we got to the pinnacle of one of the hills.

The firm we used, Cotswold Walks, arranged our stays in towns along our route (always with a marvelous English breakfast to start the day), transported our luggage from place

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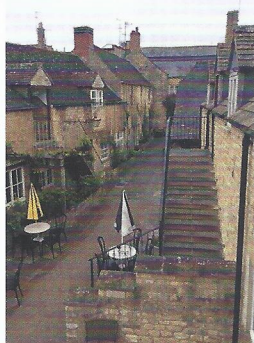
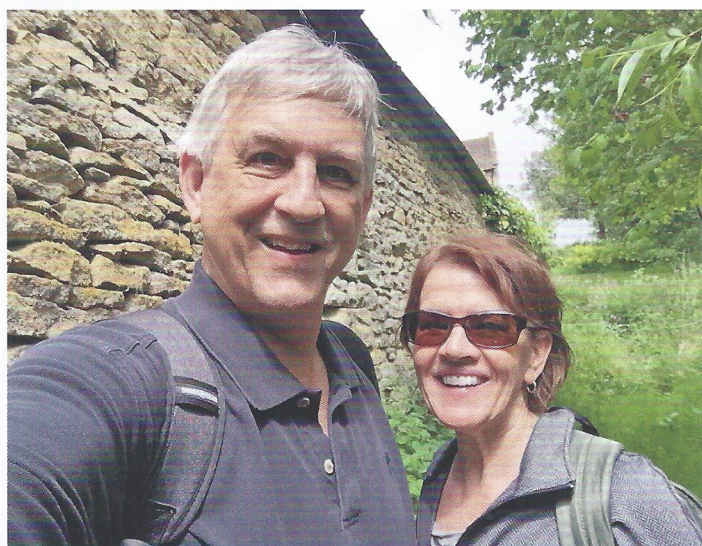


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to place, and provided detailed descriptions to help us find our way.

In England, there are public rights of way that cross private land, so our route took us through fields of winter wheat, rapeseed, and broad beans — and pastures with Cotswold sheep. We also got up close and personal with cows and horses. We learned about the different kinds of gates separating the properties, and got comfortable with the descriptions of the lanes, roads, paths, tracks, and drives that we would cross or walk along.

The towns, especially the smaller ones, are like stepping back in time. The buildings are all made of stone from the local quarries and at the center of each town is a church, usually hundreds of years old, surrounded by a graveyard.

We will remember entering Blockley via a narrow and steep street that sloped down toward the church, just as its bells struck noon. When we went inside, we found out that it was the location of the Father Brown television series. Upon leaving the town, halfway up the large hill on the last leg of our last day, the church bells started ringing again and kept going for several minutes. It was between the normal clock times, so we don't know why it was happening. It felt like a sign.

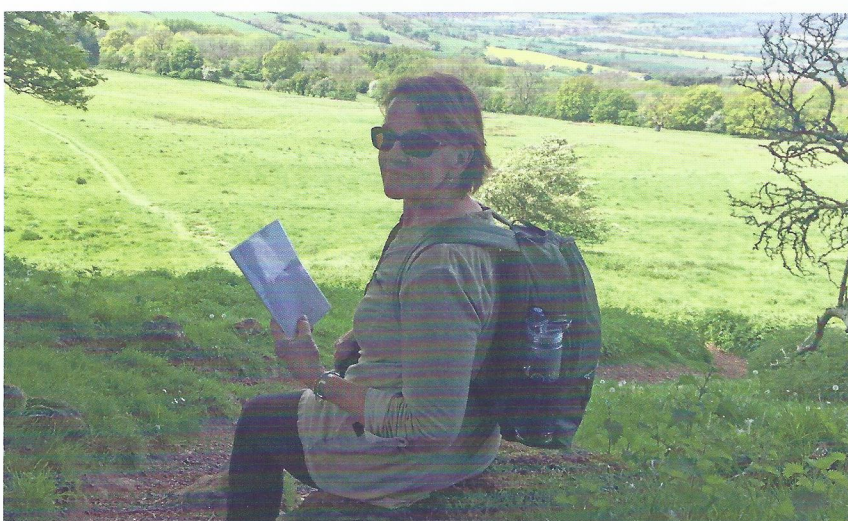
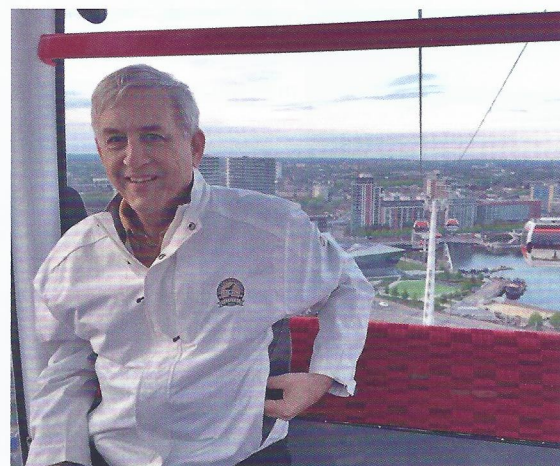
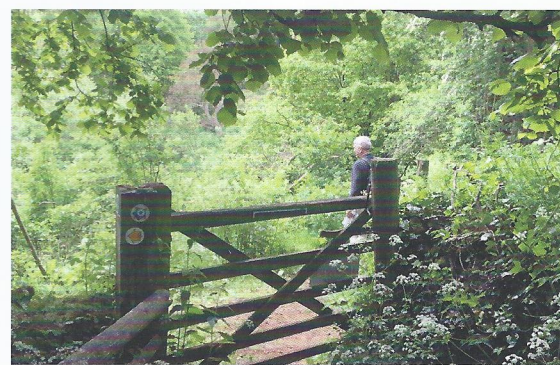
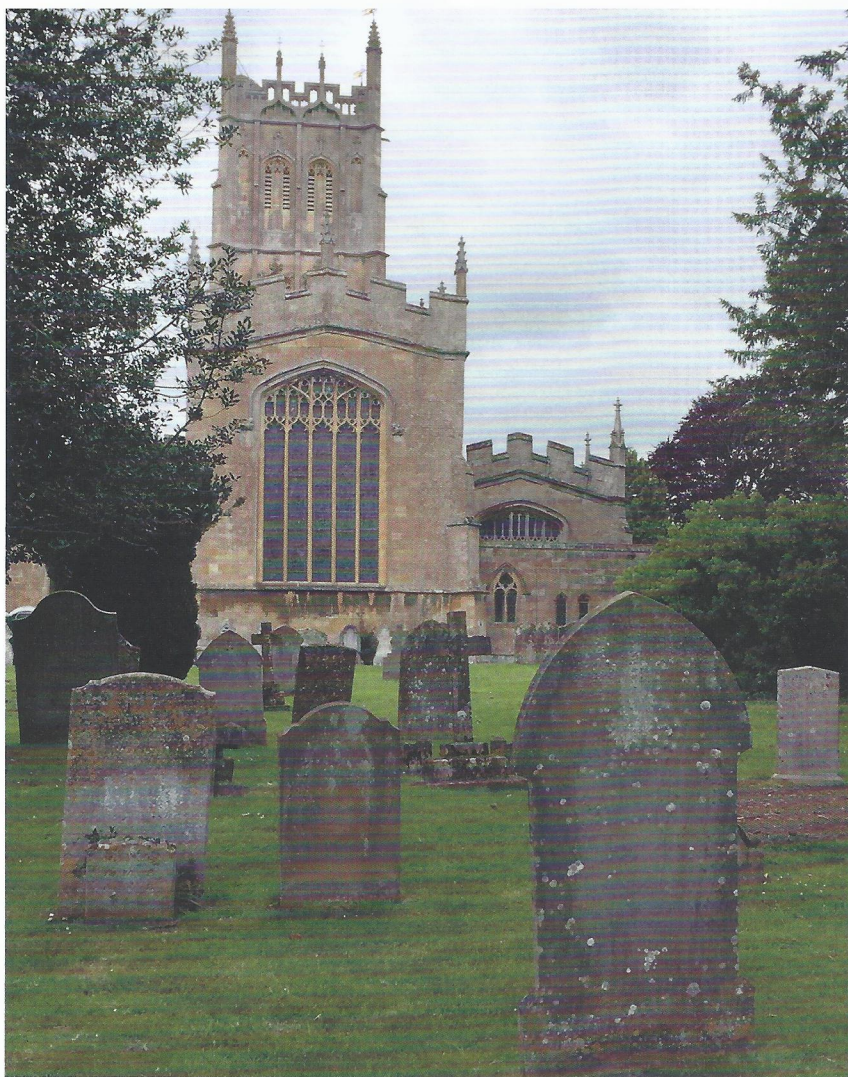
As people who grew up in a small town in farming country, we could relate a bit to these villages. It was easy to imagine that there were some people who have lived there all of their lives, some who left and never want to return, and some who undoubtedly wonder if it is time to go back home.

A couple of weeks before our trip, I had read an *Atlas Obscura* article about The Pudding Club, an event held at a hotel on Friday nights in a village in the Cotswolds. (A pudding in their parlance is a dessert in ours, so the variety was greater than you might expect.) By chance, we were scheduled to stay nearby on a Friday, and so we joined a bunch of Brits in eating seven different puddings (after the main course) and rating each. Sue's favorite, the sticky toffee and date pudding, was the winner.

To close out our trip, we took the train to Windsor, emerging from the train station to see the massive castle across the street. We needed to get rid of our bags, so we went to the taxi line and grabbed a ride with Muhammad. He was great, so we arranged to have him take us to the airport the next day.

We were staying at Oakley Court, "an imposing Victorian mansion overlooking the River Thames." (It looks really expensive but isn't — and we used points to lower that down to free!) The grounds are great, including several amazing driftwood sculptures, and we also found out that the building was the site of quite a number of movies, most notably *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and many horror films.

Fittingly enough, the finale of our trip was a visit to Windsor Castle. It was disappointing on the anniversary of Harry and Meghan's wedding not to be able to get into St. George's Chapel, but it is closed to tourists on Sundays. We did see the historic State Apartments, with its incredible displays of guns, swords, and paintings — and loved the Moat Garden.



I found myself thinking about that old country and the new one across the water that it spawned when standing in front of the massive painting of George III above the fireplace at the center of one of the rooms. Despite the British allegiance to the monarchy, that form of government gave way to democracy around the world (although both in Britain and the United States it is a bit wobbly right now). In any case, being in a castle whose beginnings reach back almost a thousand years makes you think differently about the sweep of time.

As we left the gate to go back to our hotel, Sue noticed a listing of services at the chapel and asked a guard about one scheduled for later that afternoon. He said it was open to the public and that if we were interested, we could come back and get in line an hour later.

Of course, we did so, and were among the last people to be seated in the quire, that inner sanctum of the famous chapel where all the liturgical action takes place. It was a long way from the churches in the villages.

We were attending evensong (or “evening prayer”). As part of the normal (and very formal) structure, the “bidding” at the beginning of it was in honor of Margaret Humphreys, a member of the chapel congregation who had passed away. She had “a passion for walking” and had written a number of books about it. After our experience in the Cotswolds, we could relate.

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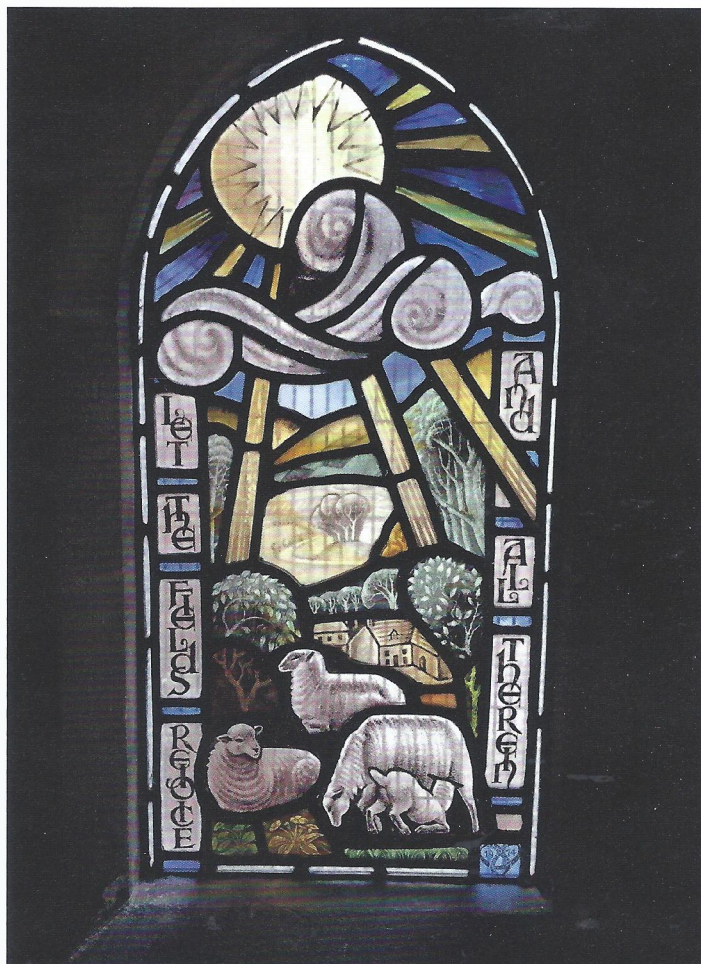
“Go forth into the world in peace; be of good courage; hold fast that which is good; render to no one evil for evil; strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak; help the afflicted; honour everyone.”

The service was moving and the choir, with its young boys singing alto and soprano and men the lower parts, was heavenly. We were sent off with a blessing to “go forth into the world in peace; be of good courage; hold fast that which is good; render to no one evil for evil; strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak; help the afflicted; honour everyone.”

As we left through the same gate where we had exited earlier, Sue and I looked at each other in disbelief. It had truly been a magical day in the castle.

We walked down the hill to the line of taxis to return to the hotel for our last night’s sleep in England. First in line, as if we had planned it, was Muhammad.

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