

IMPRESSIONS OF ENGLAND

(Originally published July 1980)

Returning home in mid-June after almost four weeks away, we found it difficult to get back into the routine of daily practice. It may be that we are just growing older, or it may be that the enjoyments of travel are more and more nullified by the accumulation of obligations and trivia that pile up during an absence. All in all, however, a week or so of annoyance in getting the mess sorted out is not too great a price to pay for the pleasures of time away.

On this trip we spent the last week of May and the first week of June in England; our first visit after a lapse of thirteen years. It was a good time to go; the rhododendron, the chestnut trees, the hawthorn and the laburnum were all in full bloom. The weather was unusually fine—not too cold, and not too warm—with an occasional day of overcast and intermittent showers and only one day of steady light rain. Unfortunately, the one rainy day ruined a picnic on the lovely grounds of Eton where we were scheduled to watch the annual cricket match and boat races. But in spite of soaked hair and dripping clothes, we did tour that interesting village, the chapel and school buildings, and some of the dormitory "houses" that have been occupied by generations of Britain's elite young scholars. We can report that tradition in dress and custom still carry on even in the face of Space-War pinball machines lining the walls of the student sweetshop hangout.

The first week, spent in London, was mainly occupied with a medical meeting, but there was ample time for the usual group touring, castle visiting, restaurant sampling and window shopping in some of the famous stores. A night at the new National Theatre was outstanding, and our formal banquet at the elegant Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists at which we toasted the Queen was most impressive. London is an interesting but overcrowded big city, not nearly as pleasant as Paris, and justly deserving of its reputation as the most expensive city in the Western world; the prices for everything—hotels, meals, clothes, entertainment, transportation—were not only astronomical but quite unbelievable. (All the shopping bargains are here at home.) It is filled with foreigners from all over the world, and the crowds along its main shopping streets resemble daily those of a last-minute Christmas shopping crush. We read a lot about the disintegrating economy and sad financial plight of Britain, but apparently the bad news hasn't penetrated into the consciousness of the Londoners. The general affluence is impressive to the short-time visitor. (Four Rolls-Royce agencies in a Mayfair block and a half!)

We headed for the countryside on our own after the first week, spending a couple days in Hampshire, a couple of more in the peaceful Cotswolds, and a final two days in

Dorset, just south of the Salisbury plain on the edge of Ringwood Forest. Two nights were spent in the farm home of a general practitioner who has a solo panel practice in Gloucester four miles away. He doesn't make a lot of money but is satisfied with his lot and thinks the National Health Service functions well. Our orthodontist friend with whom we stayed in Dorset expressed the same satisfaction with the health system. In London, where our associations were only with the upper echelons of hospital-based physicians and senior consultants, acceptance of the system is even greater. They do quite well in spite of complaints that the political bureaucracy seldom allocates enough money to finance all of their programs.

So, our impressions of England are a little at variance with those we get from our papers and magazines. The inevitable end of Western civilization and its affluence may lie ahead, but the patient and polite Brits, who must be at least five years farther along inflationary road to decadence than we, are still enjoying life and, thank you veddy much, continue to think they'll muddle through for a while longer.

(c) *The Bulletin of the Muscogee County (Georgia) Medical Society*, "The Doctor's Lounge", Jul 1980, Vol. XXVII Vol 7, p.17