Literary Travels in England, Scotland, and Ireland, July 5-August 10, 2006

By Terry Ehret

Part One: England

In the summer of 2006, I traveled to England, Scotland, and Ireland with my family. I began my travels with my two daughters, Caitlin and Annelisa, and my sister Annie. In Scotland my husband Don and my oldest daughter Allison joined us. The trip took us to urban centers like London, Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Dublin. It also took us into the rural areas of Somerset, the Lake District, the Scottish Highlands, and the west of Ireland. Part of my desire to make this trip was to visit the settings and landscapes that have fired my imagination as a reader of literature and as a writer. What follows is an account which highlights this aspect of our travels.

London

Composed Upon Westminster Bridge
by William Wordsworth, September 1803

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

Houses of Parliament, London

London was warm—in the 80's and 90's every day we were there. And while the tourist's vision of London is fog and trench-coats, the locals assured me that London in the summer is generally balmy. The warm evenings brought Londoners out to the river, squares, and parks, and made evening strolling its own kind of entertainment. We launched our week in London with a cruise down the Thames and a "flight" on the London Eye (the millennium Ferris wheel), over the next several days we enjoyed a performance of Mozart's *Requiem* at the Church of St. Martin-in-the- Fields near

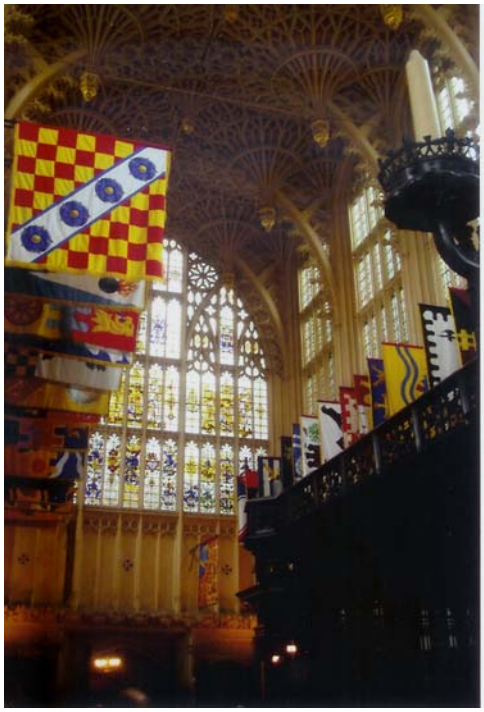
Trafalgar Square, the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Antony and Cleopatra* at the Globe Theater, and visits to many of the historical sites: The National Gallery, Buckingham Palace, Westminster Abbey, the Tower of London, Portobello Road Market, the British Museum, Piccadilly Circus, St. Paul's Cathedral.

Crossing Westminster Bridge to Jubilee Gardens our first evening in London, I looked back to see the view of the buildings of Parliament, Big Ben, and Westminster Abbey. William Wordsworth's sonnet, "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge" captures the power of seeing the city at sunrise from this point, and the city has reciprocated by placing a huge plaque with the poem at the point where the poet must have stood.

Westminster Abbey and Poets' Corner

Our first full day in London, we walked from our hotel through Hyde Park to Buckingham Palace to watch the changing of the guard. From there, we took the paths along the duck pond in Green Park toward Westminster Bridge, as we had on the evening of our arrival. Not far from the Houses of Parliament and the bell tower of Big Ben stands Westminster Abbey, the site of royal weddings, funerals, and coronations. There are so many British kings, queens, and historical figures buried here they almost rival the thousands of living visitors wedged into this hugely popular tourist attraction. Pictured below is the chamber where the tombs of Queen Elizabeth, her half-sister Mary Tudor, her cousin Mary, Queen of Scots, and Henry VIII are all buried. Given the mortal rivalries and estrangements of these figures in life, it's hard to imagine they are getting much rest in death.

In one quieter corner of the cathedral, known as Poets' Corner, lie the memorial plaques and tombs of great British writers. Pictured here are just a few of these memorials, and among them are the Americans T.S. Eliot, Henry James who both adopted England as their homes.



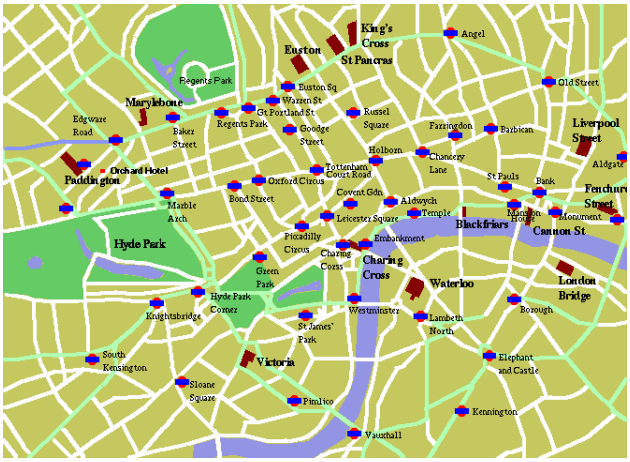
From Westminster Abbey, Whitehall Mall leads past various government buildings, including 10 Downing Street, the residence of Prime Minister Tony Blair, who was hanging onto his position by his fingernails. Whitehall ends at Trafalgar Square where stands the monument to Admiral Nelson, the National Gallery and National Portrait Gallery, and the Church of St. Martin in the Fields.

Church of St. Martin in the Fields

At the Café in the Crypt beneath the church, we met my friend Michelle Penn and her boyfriend for dinner and for the evening candlelight concert of Mozart's *Requiem*, one of many observances throughout London that day of the anniversary of the bombings on the underground and buses which took the lives of over 50 people on July 7, 2005. *The Requiem* is one of my favorite pieces of music, one both Caitlin and Annelisa love, too, having played and sung portions of it in symphonic band and choir. We were treated that evening to yet another beautiful Mozart composition, the Concerto for Clarinet.

Discovering the Oystercard

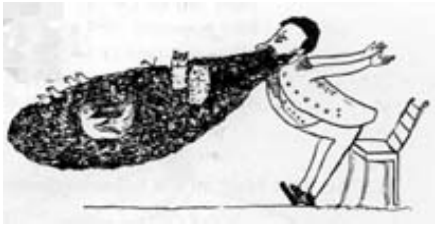
During dinner, I asked Michelle and Ben what they liked best about London, and both said the free admission to the museums and the Oystercard, which is a pre-paid pass that gives complete access to all of London's transportation systems at a discount. Having already worn out our feet with walking, and our budget with taxis, we were ready to try the Oystercard. After the concert, I popped down to the Trafalgar Square underground station and came back with four blue passes. As promised, they opened London to us and made the phrase "Mind the gap," part of our regular vocabulary. Most of our travel inside London took place on the underground subway system which took us back home that evening to our hotel.



Edward Lear's House

During our week in London, we stayed at a small guest house called the Edward Lear Hotel. It had, in fact, been the home of the comic artist and poet Edward Lear, author of "The Owl and the Pussycat," and one-time drawing teacher of Queen Victoria. This was a very affordable and very centrally located hotel. The showers and toilet were down the hall, but the rooms were clean and comfortable, the breakfast room was delightfully decorated with Lear limericks and drawings (some pictured here), and internet access was available for free. A full English breakfast was included. And the location was a block from Marble Arch, the northern entrance to Hyde Park where Speaker's Corner is situated. There's a tube stop there on the Central Line, and many of the bus lines run up and down Oxford Street, also a block from the Edward Lear.

There was an Old Man with a beard,
Who said, "It is just as I feared!--
Two Owls and a Hen,
Four Larks and a Wren,
Have all built their nests in my beard!"



There was a Young Lady whose bonnet
Came untied when the birds sat upon it;
But she said, "I don't care!
All the birds in the air
Are welcome to sit on my bonnet!"

Portobello Road and Abbey Road

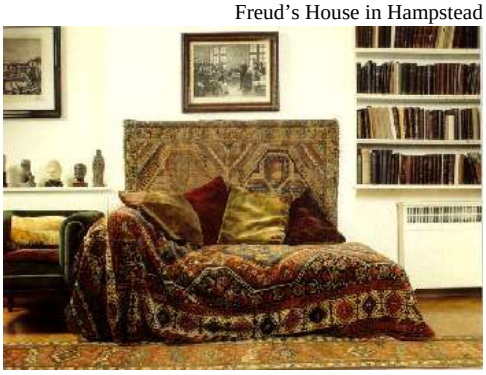
On Saturday, we were up early to visit the Portobello Road Market just a short bus ride west from Marble Arch. The open air market runs for several blocks and includes hundreds of indoor and outdoor vendors. The first half of the market is mainly antiques and bric-a-brac. The second half is a fruit and vegetable market. Though we wandered for two hours, we never made it to the second half.

Since the many of the underground stations were closed for upgrading construction, I had to ask the local police for directions to our next destination, the Abbey Road crosswalk in front of the Beatles'Abbey Road Studio. We traveled by elaborate circuitous subway routes and transfers, but surfaced a few blocks away from the scene above. And, of course, tried to dodge the traffic while snapping a picture, along with all the other tourists. Though it looks quiet here, it is actually a rather busy street, too busy for anyone to stand and pose for a photo. We had to settle for the crosswalk.

Freud's House

Freud's House in Hampstead

One of the less-touristed spots I had planned to visit in London was the Freud Museum in Hampstead, not far from Abbey Road. 2006 is the 150th anniversary of Freud's birth. At Freud's House, we saw the horse-hair couch covered in Persian carpet which he used for his sessions with patients, artists, and writers, such as H.D., and Lou Andreas-Salome.



Also on display was an impressive collection of votives from all over the world, Greek vases, and Egyptian figurines. Freud's mapping of the underworld of the unconscious has influenced my writing in many ways, mostly my interest in dreams and in writing that straddles the conscious and unconscious experience. But equally important was the poet H.D.'s *Tribute to Freud*, written after their collaborative sessions interpreting her waking visions. H.D. had enormous respect for Freud, yet she understood his genius was balanced by personal flaws and limitations. For example, she recalled the doctor showing her his favorite statuette of Athena, and remarking to the poet that the goddess was perfect except that she had lost her spear.

As I wandered through the two stories, photographs and small domestic objects appeared with explanatory cards—in each case a dream Freud or one of his patients had had about the object accompanied by Freud's interpretation of it. It was rather like walking inside Freud's unconscious. Freud only lived there the last two years of his life, after being evacuated from Vienna in 1938. But his daughter Anna lived there most of her life, and so the house was also imbued with her very different presence—a bowl of cherries beside a note card with one of her children's recurrent dreams, or her great loom with a quote linking dreaming and weaving. Anna Freud was an avid weaver and knitter; in fact, she practiced knitting while she analyzed her patients.

Anna Freud's loom and desk

Notes from my journal on visiting Freud's House:

The tall, white-paned windows look out into the garden of Freud's house, 20 Maresfield Gardens. A warm wind blows noisily through tossing trees. Upstairs a painting of white wolves in a tree—a dream of a patient known as "The Wolf Man." Anna Freud's weaving loom stands alongside stories of her father's dreams of Rome and Athens, the laboratory, his father's death, the three fates in the kitchen. A quote beside the loom reads "…very many trains of thought contributing to the dream converge…. This is where we find ourselves in the middle of a thought-factory where, as in the weaver's masterpiece, one thrust of his foot, and a thousand threads invisibly shift, and hither and thither the shuttles dart—just once he treads and a thousand strands twine together." On the walls, strange sketches of haunted drapes, figures of death, dancing skeletons. Downstairs, in dim museum-light, his desk and couch, his books and votives, his spectacles, several red-figure urns. Little boats of death behind glass. A copper tea kettle before the coal fireplace, and wooden table, hexagonal, with the Star of David inlaid in ivory. DaVinci's Virgin and St. Anne. Moses in the moment before he smashes the commandments. More dreams in another room—a broken candle and a burning child, violets (from the French 'viol' [rape]), a bowl of cherries.

Keats' House

A 45 minute walk away from Freud's House is the house where the poet John Keats lived in Hampstead Heath during the final years of his very short and prolific life. We were among a handful of visitors to the house that afternoon, which gave our visit a feeling of intimacy.

There we saw the plum tree in the garden under which he composed "Ode to a Nightingale." (Not the same tree, of course, but a seedling from the original, planted in the same spot.) I was able to trace the itinerary of his grand walking tour with his friend Charles Brown, which took him from the Lake District and Wordsworth's home at Rydal Water to Ayrshire in Scotland and the home of Robert Burns, north to the Great Glen Way, along the shores of Loch Ness and the other smaller waters, past the Falls of Foyers, all the way to Inverness. This was essentially the route we would be driving later in our trip. I marveled that, two years before Keats died of tuberculosis, he had the stamina to walk over 600 miles in 42 days.

Also on display in the same room where I found Keats' itinerary were love tokens exchanged between Keats and his beloved, Fanny Brawne, his neighbor at Hampstead Heath. Among these was a gold lyre strung with strands of Keats' hair.

As we were getting ready to leave Keats' house, one of the young women working there invited us to join her upstairs in Keats' bedroom where they were about to hold a poetry reading of his work. As it turned out, we were the only audience, but I loved the added charm and intimacy of hearing two women, neither more than 20, reading the poems Keats wrote when he was himself that age. We stood between his bed and the window looking out over the landscape of north London, once the country of Hampstead Heath—

lakes, ponds, streams, and wood which the Romantic poets all turned to for their inspiration.

Keats' House in Hampstead Heath

The plum tree where Keats wrote "Ode to a Nightingale"

*W*hen I have fears

WHEN I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
Before high piled books, in charact'ry,
Hold like rich garners the full-ripen'd grain;
When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
And think that I may never live to trace
Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour!
That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the faery power
Of unreflecting love! - then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.

Keats left England for Italy in the summer of 1821, hoping the warmer climate would relieve the symptoms of consumption he knew would eventually kill him, as it had his brother. Before leaving Hampstead Heath, Keats broke off his engagement to Fanny. On his tombstone, at his request, these words appear. "Here lies one whose name was writ in water."

Speaker's Corner and Hever Castle

Altogether, we spent four days exploring the city of London and two days a bit farther afield. On Sunday we took our first day trip into Surrey to visit Hever Castle, family home of Anne Boleyn, second wife of Henry VIII.

We started the morning at Speaker's Corner just inside Hyde Park and not far from our hotel. When we arrived, there was only one lone gentleman standing on a small step ladder, holding a sign that read "Today's Talk is About You." Caitlin eventually struck up a conversation with him, and the effect was like putting a coin in a penny arcade. Immediately he began his long-winded spiel about subjectivity, drawing other listeners and speakers. I recited Coleridge's "Kublai Khan" and Edward Lear's "The Owl and the Pussycat," and Caitlin and Annelisa sang Phil Ochs' "Small Circle of Friends."

Getting from Victoria Station in London to Hever Castle was tricky because, like the underground system, some rail lines are also under construction on the weekends. By a combination of train and bus, we ended up in the town of Oxted, waiting for the connection to Hever Station. Not realizing that the little train behind us was ours, we missed the 2:00 and had to wait another hour for the train to make its run down the line and back. But we spent a pleasant hour in the local pub, watching the World Cup and chatting with a local woman who taught Caitlin a little Cockney rhyming-slang. ("Gotta get something down my Gregory," means "I'm thirsty " because Gregory Peck rhymes with neck, which is where your throat is.)

When we finally arrived at Hever Station (little more than a wooden platform), we began our half-hour walk down several country lanes to the castle. The castle itself had fallen into disrepair until it was bought by the Astor family (owners of the Waldorf Astoria hotel in NY) and beautifully restored it. The gardens, too, are exquisitely kept. Our delayed arrival meant we didn't have much time to explore the grounds, and I was sorry to miss the celebrated water-maze, but Annelisa and I wandered through the yew-maze, the Tudor rose garden, and the chessmen topiaries.

The British Museum

A trip to the British Museum is like a tour through the empire on which the sun never set. It is an astounding collection of art and artifacts from all over the world. In tracing some of my literary roots, my primary destination was the Reading Room—a free public library where Marx and Engels wrote *The Communist Manifesto,* and where writers have often gathered to read their work and talk about their ideas.

The group which revolved around Ezra Pound in the years before and after World War I, whom Pound dubbed "Imagists," met regularly here. And it's no surprise, wandering the Greek and Egyptian Rooms, to see where H.D.got her inspiration for her Greek lyrics and the epic poem *Helen in Egyp*t. Another treasure I wanted to see was the Portland Vase, a small, cobalt-blue and white Greek urn with exquisite, cameo-style carved images. It is said to have inspired Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

Oxford

Another morning we day-tripped north to Oxford. Many a writer found a home in Oxford, including *J.R.R. Tolkein, C.S. Lewis,* and Charles Dodgeson, better knows as *Lewis Carrol.* When I was first imagining a life as a writer, fantasy, folklore, and mythology were my sources of inspiration, including the works of Tolkein and Lewis. I read the *Chronicles of Narnia* as a child, Lewis' spiritual books and essays in high school, along with Tolkein's *The Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings.* By the time I was 14, I had already determined to become a student of literature and a philologist—simply because that had been their professions.

The Eagle and the Child Pub, Oxford

Examination Halls, Oxford

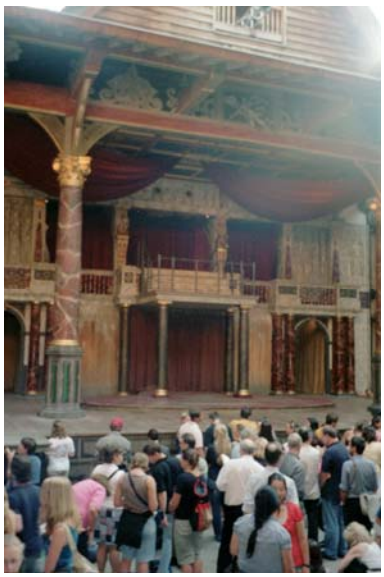
Caitlin and Annelisa at the Eagle and Child

I also learned from my high-school research that Tolkein and Lewis had been colleagues in Oxford, part of a writers' circle that called themselves "The Inklings." One of their meeting places was a pub called the Eagle and the Child (aka the Bird and the Baby). It is still there in Oxford, and we had the pleasure of taking lunch there during our visit. If you've ever seen the film *Shadowlands,* based on the life of C.S. Lewis, then you've seen this pub, or a recreation of it, in the scene when "Jack" Lewis explains the magic of entering Narnia through the furs in the wardrobe.

Oxford University is really a collection of individual colleges scattered around the town. Tolkein taught at Merton College, Lewis at Magdelen College, and Charles Dodgeson at Christ Church College. One of the buildings shared by the colleges is the Examination Hall pictured above, where Tolkein used to deliver his lectures on Beowulf.

Even on a Tuesday, Oxford was packed with tourists, shoppers, and fleets of tour buses. Every college and university building charges a separate entry fee, and even the guided tours have to stay outside many of the historic buildings during the high-tourist-season. We took a guided walking tour of the city, which included entry to Wadham College. Later I climbed the spire of University Church, the highest point of the city, to get a better view of the medieval college yards and buildings. Ideally, Oxford should be seen in the off-season, when its medieval character and university feel would best be preserved.

London's Globe Theater



Originally, I had imagined combining a trip to Oxford with a visit to Stratford-on-Avon, Shakespeare's birthplace. But that proved too ambitious a plan for one day, especially because we had tickets for the theater that evening. I suppose it seems strange not to include Stratford as a literary destination. But in my mind, London and the theaters of London were Shakespeare's real home. Like Oxford, Stratford in the summer is thronging with tourists and tour buses, and my primary reason for going—catching a performance by the Royal Shakespeare Company—could only be accomplished in London, where the company performs through the summer season. And so we returned to London from our day in Oxford in time for the Royal Shakespeare Company's performance of *Antony and Cleopatra* at the Globe Theater. Our tickets were "groundling" tickets, meaning we stood in the open area in front of the stage. The play was presented surprisingly in more comic than tragic mood, and the characters frequently stepped outside the seams of the performance to connect with the audience in a witty, winking sort of way, including a chorus-line-style curtain call. Aside from the challenge of standing for three hours after the long day at Oxford, we enjoyed the spectacle and the balmy midnight stroll down the south side of the Thames and across the Millennium Bridge.

Jane Austen's Home, Chawton, Hampshire

On our last day in London, while the rest took a day off, I headed by train into Hampshire to the south-east, through the village of Alton to an even smaller village, reachable only on foot (or car), called Chawton. I had planned this particular outing because another of my literary heroes—Jane Austen--lived the last two decades of her life here. *The Lonely Planet* guide doesn't even mention Chawton or Austen's home here. And even Rick Steves, my other source of travel information, overlooks Chawton in favor of the Jane Austen Centre in Bath, which attracts droves of tourists and Austen fans. But if it's Austen's life you're interested in and her writing, forget the commercialized and film-oriented Centre in Bath, and plan to visit Chawton instead.

Austen's writing table

As at Keats' house, I was one of a handful of visitors, and had the pleasure of seeing the infamous "squeaky door," which signaled the approach of visitors, her tiny writing table, her needle-work, letters, illustrations from the original publications of her novels, all right there in the house she loved in the green countryside of Hampshire. Here I also found a quote from her letter to Cassandra that perfectly fit the 90-degree day:

"What terrible hot weather we are having! It keeps me in a constant state of inelegance."

Jane Austen's house in Chawton

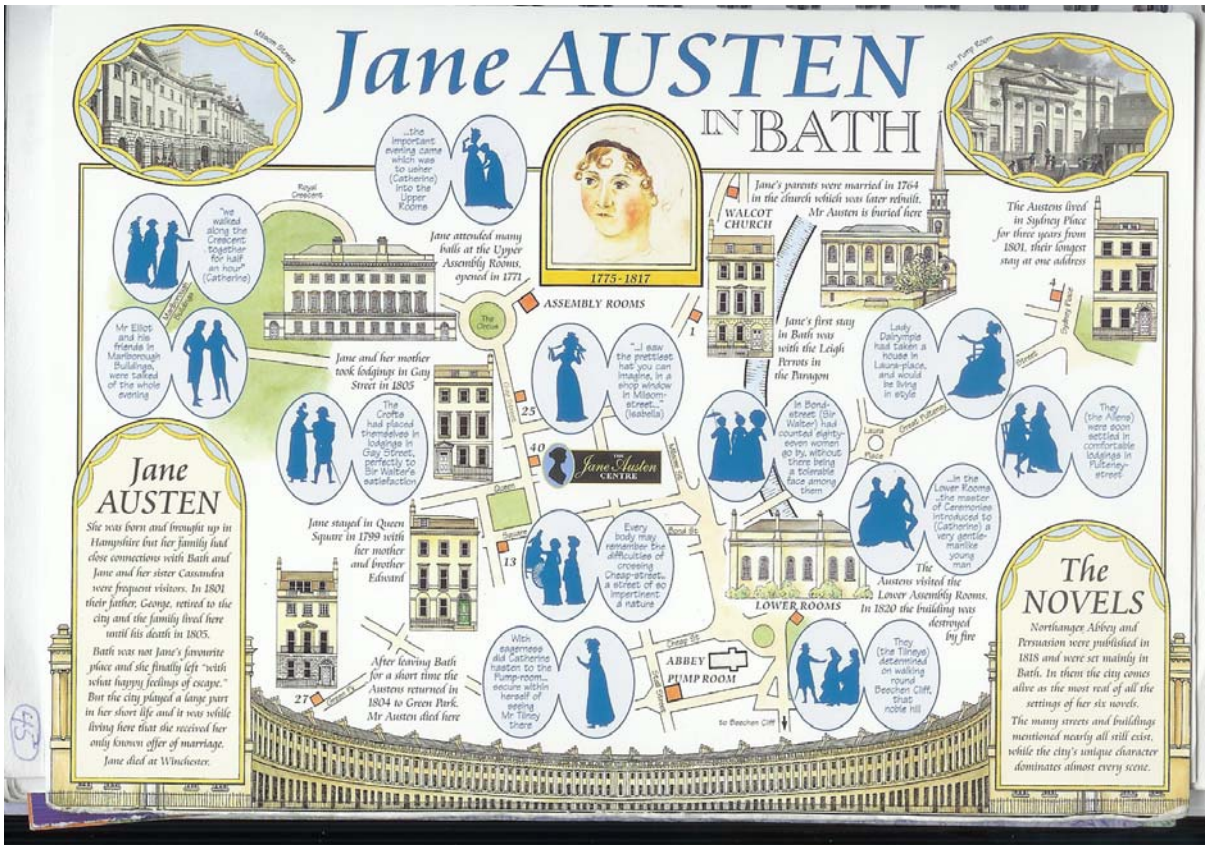
Garden of Jane Austen's house

The gardens, too, are a delight and very welcoming to picnickers or folk like me who just want to sit and enjoy.

More than Tolkein and Lewis, Austen's life and work gave me the courage to consider taking up the writing life. First because, as a shy and awkward teen, I needed her heroines. I needed to know that the small events of a woman's life could be the subject of serious literature. And I needed to believe that men (like those she imagined as her heroes) might find a woman's intelligence arousing rather than threatening. Much later, when I had begun to publish, I realized it would be many years before I would have a book to my credit. It was comforting to know that Austen published her first novel when she was 37. " I could do that," I told myself at age 27. And, in fact, my first solo publication came out the year I turned 37.

Across the street from the house is a tea-room called Cassandra's Cup (after Jane Austen's beloved sister), where I was treated to tea with fresh strawberries, scones, butter-cream and jam. Alton is less than an hour from London, and the walk from Alton to Chawton takes about a half-hour (if you walk briskly) or 45 minutes (at a more leisurely pace). Though Alton was just a town on the way to Austen's house, I found myself tempted by the number of charity and thrift stores all up and down the main street. I also spotted a shop devoted to Beanie-Babies (remember those?) with a sign in the window advertising that the shop specialized in "repairs and rentals." Rent a beanie-baby? Go figure!

Bath and Somersetshire

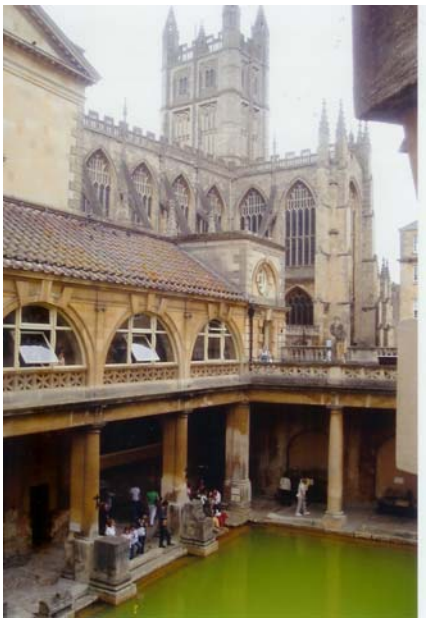


The day after the outing to Chawton, we packed up, headed to Paddington Station, and were off to the city of Bath-Spa in Somerset near Bristol.

Jane Austen lived several years of her life in Bath, and visited frequently, but she didn't love Bath. At that time it was rife with social snobbery of the worst kind. Happily, Bath has transformed itself into a more charming contemporary city, very walkable, very accessible, and now one of the few UNESCO Heritage Cities in the world, designated as such because of the unusually well-preserved and period buildings designed by the architect John Wood. The Avon River flows through the center of Bath, the Pump Room and Assembly Rooms, the Royal Crescent and the Royal Circus, Pultney Bridge and Pultney Street still retain all their 18th/19th Century grandeur, and

on top of that is the archeological complex of the Roman Baths, unknown to the builders and socialites of Austen's day. Anyone visiting Bath will find all these treasures in a three-hour circuit of the city. We were fortunate to catch a free 2 ½ hour walking tour of Bath starting from right in front of the entrance to the Roman Baths. Our guide was an elderly fellow, a great history buff, with the wry British humor and the remarkable ability to outpace us all up and down the steep streets of the city.

The Pump Room and Entrance to the Roman Baths



The "gravelly path"

Among the spots our guide showed us is the "gravelly path" where couples used to stroll for some privacy when Bath, in its heyday as a social center, put everyone in a fishbowl of gossip. Here Austen's Captain Wentworth proposes to Anne Eliot in the novel *Persuasion*. Some Austen scholars have speculated that Wentworth was based on the real-life brother of poet William Wordsworth. Jane Austen met the sailor brother, John, in Devon, while John's ship was delayed by contrary winds, and John Wordsworth may have been the mysterious lover mentioned in several accounts originating with Jane's sister Cassandra. Their possible romance was thwarted by John Wordsworth's untimely drowning in 1805.

One evening, Caitlin and I took a pub-crawl tour of Bath—the only two on the tour that evening, and learned a lot about the working man's Bath. But if you want to see a bit of Bath most tourists never get to see, walk across Pultney Bridge and up behind Sydney Gardens to the old Kennet and Avon canal. Here is a secret, serene footpath through gardens, alongside this remnant of the canal system which once linked London and Bath. The longboats are purely for pleasure now, and the official speed limit is 4 mph.

We took three outings out of Bath while we stayed there: one to the medieval town of Wells with its great cathedral, and the nearby odd village of Wookey Hole. The second outing was to Bristol where I was scheduled to give a poetry reading at Borders Books with my friend from London, Michelle. The third was with a group called Mad Max tours to Stonehenge, Avesbury, Lacock Village (where parts of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Harry Potter* were filmed), and Castle Coombe (where *Dr. Doolittle* was filmed). Regretfully, we couldn't fit in a trip to Glastonbury. Though necessary for any complete tour of Arthurian England, that will have to wait for a return visit. And Bath is definitely worth a repeat visit.

In the high-tourist season, one can find expensive lodgings, or more expensive lodgings. Nothing is really affordable. We opted for the YMCA International House, which is well-

located within a 5-minute walk of all the sites of Bath, on a quiet little square right off Broad Street (British-English for "main street"). And for good meals, we discovered Il Bottelino Italian restaurant near our hostel (and not far from the Upper Assembly Rooms), and the Wife of Bath near the river and Bath Abbey. We also opted for picnics because Bath, which is built on two hills, has public parks and gardens, some with spectacular views of the Avon valley.

Note: This is not the same Avon that flows through Stratford. Apparently in the original Celtic language, *avon* simply meant river, and so there are many rivers in England that bear this name.

Wells Cathedral, interior

Wells town center

Harry Potter's House from the film
Harry Potter and the Socerer's Stone,
Lacock Village

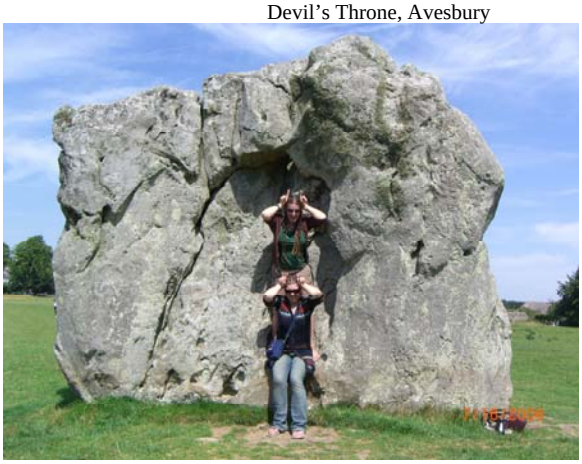
The Bridge of Castle Coomb,
setting of the film *Dr. Doolittle*

South of Bath lies the Salisbury Plain with its great stone circles of Stonehenge and Avesbury. Stonehenge is much maligned these days as an over-touristed place where the great stones are kept behind a cyclone fence. And so I was surprised at how majestic and powerful the site was, perhaps because we were visiting early on a Sunday morning. Our guide pointed out along the drive that nearly every field in the Salisbury plain has a circle-mound, very likely a burial place. He also took us by a crop circle, one of those mysterious patterns that appear in the wheat fields of Salisbury plain, and then to the largest human-made mound anywhere in the world—Silbury Hill. No one knows what this great hill was used for, or what it was meant to honor, though it may have represented the great earth-mother. Later, when we visited Newgrange in Ireland, we would see other such human-built mounds, but none as tall or imposing as Silbury. In the town of Avesbury, north of Stonehenge, we were able to walk around among the standing stones, which not only encircle the village, but stand among the buildings and sheep pastures. There we experimented with dousing sticks to see the effects of the magnetic power these stones hold.

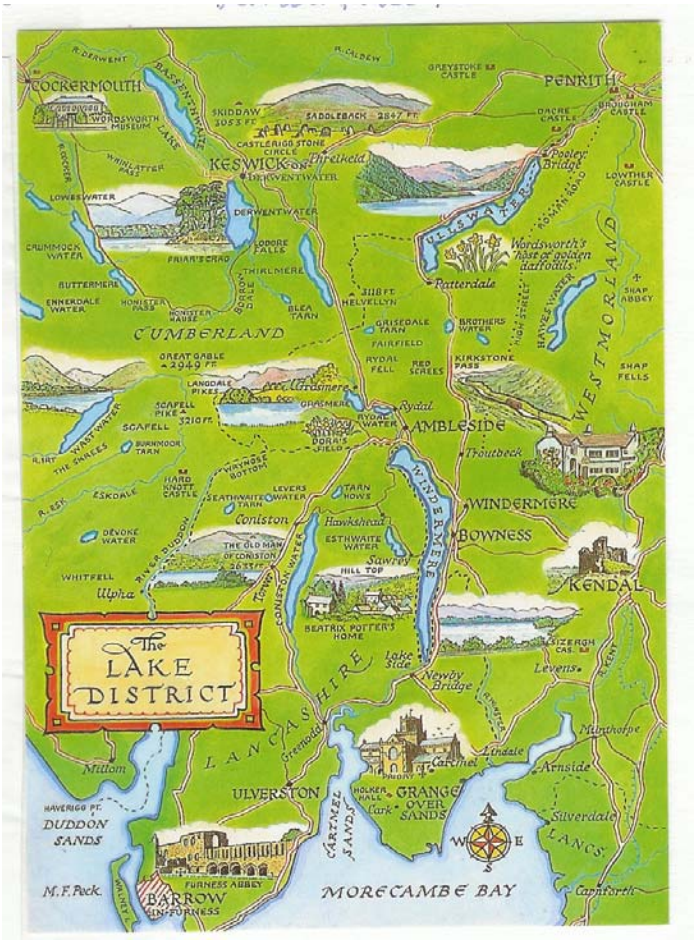
Silbury Hill

Standing Stones at Avesbury

Devil's Throne, Avesbury



The Lake District



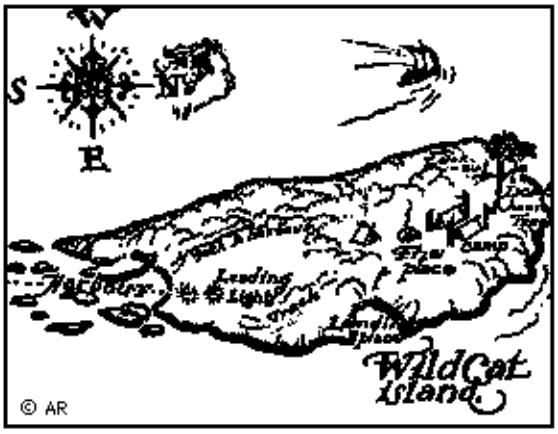
We left Bath on a Monday morning. A five-hour train ride north of Bath brought us to the third leg of our literary travels in England, which included a three-day bicycle tour of the area around Windermere, Esthwaite Water, Rydal Water, and Grasmere, the homes of children's author Beatrix Potter and the Romantic poet William Wordsworth. Our bed and breakfast lodgings, mountain bikes and helmets, maps, itineraries, water bottles, and all the details were arranged by Country Lanes Tours, located in a small office right next to the train station in Windermere. It was a real treat to be able to get off the tourist routes and into the countryside at our own slow speed and leisure. All during our stay in London and Bath the weather had been hot. It continued hot during our Lake District sojourn. In fact, the prediction one day was for 103 degrees, the hottest ever on record for the UK. The Brits thought we were nuts to be out cycling in such extreme heat, but really it wasn't so bad. The lanes we traveled along were shaded, and once up into the hills, we often caught a pleasant breeze. And there are always streams and ponds, lakes and tarns to cool off in.


Bicycling in the hills above Windermere Lake


Caitlin and Annelisa at Newby Bridge

Swallows and Amazons

During the spring in preparation for this trip, I had read for the first time the children's classic *Swallows and Amazons* by Arthur Ransome, which is set in the Lake District of the 1940's, and more or less on the great lake of Windermere (fictionally recast, of course). On one of our cruises down to Lakeside at the south end of Windermere, we passed Peel Island, which in the novel became Wild Cat Island where 4 children spend a summer camping, sailing, and fighting pirates. The 1974 film adaptation was filmed here.



Hawkshead Village and Beatrix Potter's Home at Hilltop Farm

The grammar school in Hawkshead Village

On our first day out, our cycling also took us to the village of Hawkshead where Wordsworth went to grammar school and where Beatrix Potter's husband kept his attorney's office. This is now a gallery exhibiting her drawings and sketches. We also visited Hilltop Farm where Potter lived, kept her garden, and bred sheep, along with her myriad other pets like Hunca Munca the trained mouse (who met an unfortunate end when she took a fall from the chandelier), Tom Thumb, and Jemima Puddleduck.

Quotes from Beatrix Potter

Most people, after one success, are so cringingly afraid of doing less well that they rub all the edge off their subsequent work.

All outward forms of religion are almost useless, and are the causes of endless strife. . . . Believe there is a great power silently working all things for good, behave yourself and never mind the rest. [Journals 1881-1897]

On our second day of cycling, we took the lake cruise south to Lakeside, then headed into the hills above High Brow and Low Brow (real villages), along country lanes so narrow with hedgerows, it felt like at times that we were cycling through a maze. Our destination was a medieval village called Cartmel, famous for its sticky toffee pudding, which we enjoyed with ice cream while cooling off in the little creek running between the village shops and the old priory. No literary purpose to this outing, although the scenic Newby

Bridge and Cartmel Village itself were picturesque destinations for Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy on their many rambles through the Cumbrian countryside.

Wordsworth's house at Rydal Mount

On our last morning we woke to a warm, drenching rain, and consequently opted to take the lake cruise north to Ambleside, and from there, once the rain had passed, we cycled through a lush valley alongside a clear-water creek, up to Wordsworth's two homes at Rydal Mount and Dove Cottage. The gardens at Rydal mount overlook Rydal Water with views of Windermere as well. They were designed by the poet himself and speak eloquently of his love a nature as a source of inspiration. One of his servants once said, "This is my Master's library where he keeps his books; his study is out of doors." And out in the garden stands a small summerhouse, a covered porch made of stone, where Wordsworth came to write his poems.

Wordsworth lived at Rydal Mount and at Dove Cottage with his wife, Mary, their children, and his sister Dorothy. The women in Wordsworth's life were writers, too—possibly just as accomplished wordsmiths as the poet himself.

Wordsworth's summerhouse in the garden

"To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."

View of Rydal Water from the Summer House

Several of Dorothy Wordsworth's own poems or notes in her journal were included in various editions of her brother's poetical works. Her Grasmere and Scotland journals were circulated among family and friends, and greatly admired during her lifetime.

E. de Sélincourt, who published her journals in 1933, has called her "probably... the most distinguished of English writers who never wrote a line for the general public." Nonetheless, by Wordsworth's own admission, without his sister's help, keen observations recorded in her journals, and unfailing encouragement, William would not have accomplished all he did as a poet and philosopher. Unfortunately, she spent the last twenty-five years struggling against physical and mental illness.

Dove Cottage

Mary, too had a gift for language. In the gift shop tourists were busy buying stationery and tea towels with his famous Daffodils poem (not one of my favorites, alas), but according to Coleridge, the most inspired lines in it were not Wordsworth's, but his wife, Mary's. They're not hard to pick out.

From "Daffodils"

Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.
The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed -- and gazed -- but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:
For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

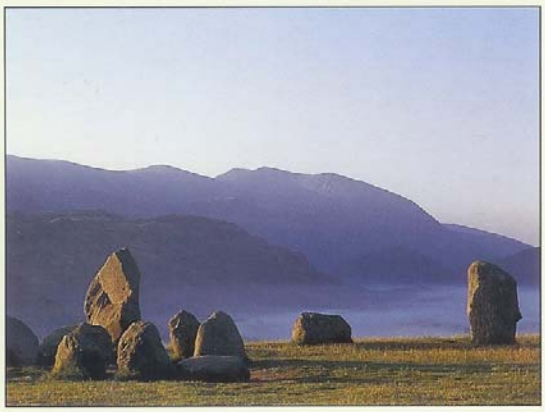
View of Grasmere near Dove Cottage

Like Keats, Wordsworth was a great traveler by foot, and he and his sister Dorothy traversed the Lake District, often in the company of other poet-friends like Southey and Coleridge. On the bed in his upstairs bedroom at Dove Cottage is the suitcase he used while out on these rambles. It is smaller than a typical carry-on flight bag. Clearly the ramblers of old knew something about the art of traveling light.

For a time, Wordsworth's friend Coleridge rented a cottage in nearby Keswick, just north of Grasmere, and the two walked frequently to and from each other's homes. Unfortunately for Coleridge, the rainy climate in the Lake District aggravated his rheumatism (a result of rheumatic fever in his youth), and he was sometimes bedridden by chronic pain. Coleridge began taking regular treatment of opium for relief, and his addiction to the drug became a lifelong and debilitating habit he never recovered from.

Coleridge's poetry is filled with a deep, wistful longing for the period of innocence and unbridled creativity which his health and addiction severely limited. And this feeling of exile from some great, primal imagination also appears repeatedly in the poems of Wordsworth. Perhaps this Romantic sense of a primal past filled with mystery and lost glory was fed by the landscape itself—a landscape where ruins lie underfoot, some so old, the folk of the 19th Century didn't even know their origin.

In Keswick, not far from the shores of the lake is the stone circle pictured below, built about the same time as Stonehenge and Avesbury—approximately 2000 BC. The quote is from "Intimations of Immortality," Wordsworth's meditation on the Romantic idea that the soul, in its infancy, is closest to the divine.



Ode:
Intimations of Immortality

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;-
Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

Wm Wordsworth

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:

The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,

Hath had elsewhere its setting,

And cometh from afar:

Not in entire forgetfulness,

And not in utter nakedness,

But trailing clouds of glory do we come

From God, who is our home:

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!