

The English Letter

November 2 2017

Good day to you all,

We have found that the comments from tourists to the UK that there are castles everywhere, is true. It is not something that I noticed when growing up in north London. But now armed with a car and membership of The English Heritage we seem unable to go anywhere that does not have some connection to Elizabeth I, Henry VIII or William the Conqueror, together with a castle.

This letter will be full of castles and warlike matters. It is also most revealing for me to realise how little I knew/know about British History. The recent "Gunpowder" TV production is a good case in point where my explosive revelries on Nov 5 had as a base a very poor understanding of why it all happened. The "church" has a lot to answer for.

In fact I was most impressed to hear the leader of the UK Anglican Church reply to a question that Britain was not really a Christian country any more as religious beliefs or the lack thereof have significantly changed the belief structures of the population. A super after dinner debate here I think.

However, back to war.

First up was **Dover Castle**.



You may recall that there was an aborted trip earlier this year when Bev broke her wrist before we got out of the car park area. We had much better luck this time round.



Within its` walls are a Roman lighthouse and the castle was started after the Norman conquest in 1066 although the current buildings were created by Henry II and extended by his successors. The French sieges of the 13th C and medieval times initiated the building of many tunnels.

As a castle it was a garrison for up to 10000 men and the tunnels were used as a hospital and in 1940 it was the centre for Operation Dynamo that was tasked with rescuing all those soldiers stranded at Dunkirk. The castle was in use up to 1958.

I am going to cover all the castles straight away.

We very recently went up to the Medway for a walk between two spots being **Upnor and Rochester Castles**. As you might expect these go back to 1066 and Elizabeth I.



They were built to protect the route to London from Dover and the fleet that was anchored in Chatham Docks. Upnor had the latter task which it failed to do in 1667 when the Dutch crept up and destroyed most of the British fleet which represented their worst naval defeat. It was used as an artillery fort with 20 cannon and 80 men until 1945.

Rochester was an hour walk away and claims to have the tallest Norman Keep in England. It was certainly a big climb to get to the top. King John laid siege here in 1215 with the Castle started by William through to Henry I. The Cathedral can be seen in the background.

Now all of these Castles/Forts had a purpose as the English were at war with many countries for hundreds of years on and off. It is a period of history that is not that easy to follow as “English” kings were not necessarily English and had claim to lands in the UK and continental Europe with



marrriages of convenience, and the offspring, cementing these claims. But a lot of today`s politicians took History at University because it reveals so many of the reasons for being as we are now plus the unfinished business flowing from these earlier wars and struggles.

Now, in 1928 a big thing happened.

Most of the world signed up, eventually, to the **Kellogg-Briand Pact** which basically said that we should find answers to our disputes through discussion rather than war. I guess this was seen as being a little naive but it did mean that War

was no longer legal. In 1927 a nation could settle a trade dispute by going to war but not so in 1929.



Despite WWI and WWII and Vietnam etc. it is generally believed that we have gone through one of the globes most peaceful times. Today if a nation steps out of line we use sanctions and other legal and non- military means to try and resolve matters. Of course it does not always work as some countries have leaders who do not seem to have a will to go down the “legal” route.

So I think that deals with the all the castles and war things that we have done since I last wrote.

I was talking to someone about their trip to Ireland but it soon became clear that not many people know what “Ireland” is. Is it just the south or the north and south? Do teams represent both and each or was the TV correct to talk about an event being played in Belfast, Ireland? Brexit might bring clarity.



We joined the **Swanley U3A** in October and have already got involved in walks, bridge, quizzes and book club. Good for the body and mind. Our first walk took us to Ightham where we encountered



our first sight of an emu. Good pub meal finished off the day.

We have received a couple of **postcards** that were delivered by the postman. Those in SA might recall this thing that we used to write and send before the SA GPO started to unwind. Another old world happening here involves **cheques**! Yes they are still used and sent to people through the post.

For those who read, I might mention having finished **Sapiens** and at least two Margaret Atwood books including the **Handmaid`s Tale**. Sapiens deals with the evolution of the human race and once more clarifies who the first people were in SA. It was not the English nor the Dutch nor black people but the Koi and San. This is nothing new but it is a reputable publication that assists any debate that may still play out on this issue.

I had a really big day out last Friday.

It was split into two sections being the day activity of **The Old Camdenian`s Annual Lunch and AGM** with an evening in the **West End**.

I will not talk too much about the Old C Lunch as this required a lot of space and I prepared a special Old Camdenian edition of the letter, full of pictures and details.



It was the 91st Lunch with my first one being the 37th which took place in 1962 at the Connaught Rooms. I deliberately chose a route via Tufnell Park tube station with a walk to the school via my birthplace in Huddleston Road. I have to say on a lovely sunny October day the area looked rather nice, with tree lined streets and neat houses. It was a lot different from the empty and largely treeless roads that I recalled. Cars were parked up both sides whereas our early years permitted street soccer and cricket matches using empty roads other than some horse drawn carts carrying coal or milk or jumble.





This picture of the entrance to the new school grounds has the old school to the right and part of the new to the left.

It was a great day meeting old friends with a tour of the whole school, the AGM and lunch.

63 diners, toast to the Queen and the robust singing of the



School Song were all assisted by free flowing wine and



conversation. If anyone wants the Old Camdenian special Letter then just let me know.

Part of the school tour included the new 25 metre heated pool and I asked the coach if the English could now swim. The thoughtful reply was, however, a clear “no”. Well, we don’t have the weather for swimming, so nothing new there.

I went straight from the Lunch to **Trafalgar Square** where I met my brother, Ken, around 17.15. It was rush hour time and Charing Cross Station was abuzz with hordes of people going places either by tube or overland train. But I was early and could quietly take in the scene and gently exit into The Strand.



The Square was busy with tourists and people enjoying the last moments of a sunny London day. The facades of these iconic buildings were illuminated in different colours that contrasted with the light from a setting sun.



It was



a really lovely setting with Whitehall, Charing Cross

views towards The Mall, Road and St. Martins Lane. The

fountains, Edith Cavell and Nelson watched it all happen around them with George IV appearing in the foreground of this picture. I try and capture the moment with some quick snaps.



Professional buskers added music to the scene as we turned in front of St Martins in the Fields towards Leicester Square





Our destination was to the right of Edith Cavell being the brightly lit and hectic St. Martin's Lane and the London Coliseum.

The ENO were staging AIDA.

This is London's largest theatre with 2359 seats and was opened in 1904.

It was a new version but a full house were regally entertained by this superb

performance of one of the grand operas by Verdi.



We spilled out 2h 40 mins later to a city that was still full of life. Swanley was reached as the clock struck midnight. A selfie of us both seemed appropriate.

Please note the school tie.

London at its wonderful and pulsating self.



In October Courtney had her **16th Birthday** with this group of sleep overs composing off the cuff paintings as part of a week end with an SA theme.



Boats on the river, braais and The Gods Must be Crazy aided the theme with the weather not interrupting matters.

She also finished her Expedition as part of the silver **Duke of Edinburgh Awards** programme that included a number of other activities that took her to being a snake handler!

We have reached the end of this note with no reference to **politics**. But stand by for new faces in 2018 at the head of SA and Zimbabwe. NZ have just voted in a young lady leader and the Saudi Prince is making encouraging waves in the Middle East. Brexit has reached the boring stage with attempts at predicting



outcomes a bit futile. The big issue in Westminster is the manner in which men seem to have treated women for some decades with resignations and a stated desire to clean up the moral and ethical behaviour of those who seem to be on the prowl. It is Nov 6 and Swanley Town came out in their thousands for a splendid evening of bonfire and fireworks. I go out with a bang!!

Farewell from me for now and goodbye from Bev.

Alan Shearn Nov 7 2017

