

The English Letter

Feb 28 2017

A warm welcome to the year of the Rooster.

I left you on Dec 24 2016 and should just finish off those last days.

We went up to the Duchess Theatre and saw **The Play That Goes Wrong**, on Dec 31. This was a clever and carefully staged romp that has already played out for 3 years in the West End. A production suitable for all ages.



From there it was a walk via Covent Garden, Trafalgar Square, The Mall, a pub in Victoria and then back to Buckingham Palace to see in the New Year with a good view of the **fireworks from the Thames**.

I have borrowed Andrea's Facebook picture to capture the moments.

So here we are in 2017. What an ending to 2016 and what a way to finish off a dramatic year for us as we try and establish a home back in England.

I want to talk about the NHS and The Duke of Edinburgh Award but first some other news.

Although we are English, we have been behaving like **tourists** and thus we have not settled down to a regular and placid lifestyle. With Andrea and Courtney providing the energy and desire we have been travelling to see what England has to offer in the winter. For Bev and myself this has been revealing and only too clearly illustrates how little we knew about our own country when we left in 1973.

As we have a limited budget (like anyone arriving with a Rand base) the travel plans have to be carefully formulated to suit our pockets. When faced with this situation it is remarkable at how easily we have adopted to staying at YHA's and even begin to say that we prefer them to hotels! This acceptance of accommodation, catering and weather makes for a fun time and thus fortified by inner spirits, we journeyed into the narrow roads of the British countryside.



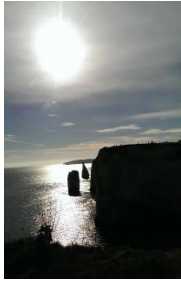
Generally speaking the **YHA's** occupy interesting old buildings in appropriate locations for the traveller. We have managed to book family rooms for all 4 of us and have used their kitchens and dining areas to self-cater. We have even managed to sip a glass or two of our own wine with dinner although they do sell alcohol and offer meals. The places have a pleasant and comfortable communal lounge and have a games area or park like gardens in the rural spots.



They do come at a great price and despite this low level of cost they seem to attract a really good and interesting clientele. With us representing 3 generations we can interact with anyone.

I want to talk about Dover Castle but a bit later.

We have travelled locally in the South and this picture is of the **Severn Sisters at Birling Gap**.



The South Downs was about walking the undulating cliff tops on a winter's day with a watered sun adding unusual affects. It was also the first test of my adjusted knee.

This was just a day out with Bev unable to come along.

Time to talk about Dover perhaps. Dover Castle was well planned and we set off for a short walk along the white cliffs before attacking the castle. But.....Bev slipped on some mud in the car park and that **changed the whole day!**

Her wrist seemed clearly broken based upon the odd angle, swelling and pain on show. And so it was goodbye to Dover Castle and hello to the NHS. Now you can begin to see why I will talk about this vast organisation. I have included a pic of the first hospital in Dover that tackled the pain and generally stabilised the break. But the damage was too complicated for this small hospital (Buckland) to deal with and we went on to Ashford and finally Darent Hospital a day or so later.



The health care varied from an operation with local anaesthetic in Ashford to a two day stay and operation in Darent under general anaesthetic. For those who have an interest, it was described as a "pulling" procedure and having witnessed the first one I can confirm the description as accurate. One nurse held the arm whilst the surgeon pulled the wrist and manually manipulated the bones back into position, or as close as they could get to the original shape/alignment.

And so to the **NHS**.

I am going to be a bit bold and make some comments using only limited but recent interaction with 2 GP's and 3 hospitals. This is in respect of Bev's wrist op and my own knee issue where an operation was turned down for cost reasons and replaced with a steroid injection.

We came from a country (SA) where the Government facilities are to be avoided if one can, and replaced by private medical care whether GP or Hospital. My views are based upon the private service in SA v NHS. This does mean that in the SA context we paid twice being the original Government tax plus the high medical Aid premiums.

I believe that the NHS was at least as good as the private health system in SA. I could go into some lengthy support comments but this takes into account the levels of skill, care, empathy, attitude and facilities whether equipment or buildings/wards.

The NHS in the UK employs some 1.5 million people making it one of the largest employers in the world. From a quick search it seems that they have around 150000 doctors and 315000 nurses. The NHS is free to UK residents which number about 64.6 million these days. It is difficult to get accurate data but if one compared the number of medical practitioners per 10000 population then we have SA at some 7.7 and the UK at 23.

Let us look at health spend. The UK bill is around 8% of GDP with SA's total cost including private and Government, at about 8.93%. SA's population is similar to the UK at perhaps 52 million (excluding illegal immigrants).

Now the UK does not look so great against some European countries but then I cannot attempt any kind of comparison with these. The growing population in the UK by way of new arrivals serves to provide the source of valuable labour but seems to have outpaced the NHS facilities in the short term. Taking a book with you to the hospital is a good idea and accepting that others may jump the

queue ahead of you may/will happen if their condition is more serious. Files get lost and data repeated on many documents. So there is room to improve and Bev's two day stay could have been an out-patient procedure and thus cost savings are still possible. The chances are that in the short term more tax payer's money will need to be used especially to support the frail members of the growing aged population. Our own happenings have yet to be concluded but.....

Well done the NHS and for the wonderful staff at all levels.

Sorry, but that took a little longer than intended.

So onto something else.



We had a visitor from SA. Bev's niece, **Lindsay**, came over for just under a month staying with 3 groups of people including ourselves in Swanley. For our part Courtney took her to SCAR (Second Chance Animal Rescue) for some dirty voluntary work; Andrea took her into London for a day and we escorted her to some notable old estates amongst other bits and pieces. The picture is of Knole House from the times of Henry VIII, but we also had a look over the home of Churchill at Chartwell and 700 year old Ightham Mote. She was able to feed the "wild" deer at Knole.

Like all those from the sunnier climes there was a desire to experience snow (actually snow has fallen in Jhb) and it arrived just in time.

Courtney is doing the **Duke of Edinburgh Award** (Mackenzie just finishing hers in Yorkshire) for 15+ year olds, that strives to stretch people to reach new levels and covers the areas of Volunteering, Physical effort, skills and Expedition. It takes from 6 to 12 months to complete requiring a deep level of commitment and determination.



The next picture sums it up, being a shot of her 5km run that is all about PB times.

It is cold, it has been snowing and it is early on a winter's morning. She has completed runs in Dover, Weymouth making a total of 10 so far.

The run in Weymouth took place whilst we were on another of our hit and run type travels. This one was for two nights being one in Swanage (see earlier picture) and Lulworth Cove. Bev was now on board although the Durdle Door walk saw her opt out in favour of a day spent with old workmate Carol from our times at BAT in Millbank, Westminster. I think "they talked a lot" covers their day.



For us, we took on the steep climbs and drops leading to the Harry Potter type spot of Durdle Door.



Corfe Castle, Weymouth, Lulworth Cove and Old Harry Rocks saw more walking and site seeing in this lovely **Jurassic coastline of Dorset.**

Please note blue skies.



Corfe Castle was started by William the Conqueror in 1086 and held off Cromwell for two years during the Civil War in the 1640's. It is a ruin now, at the orders of Cromwell and assisted by the folk of Corfe Castle village whose houses have a remarkable similarity to the stonework of the old castle!



The walk to Old Harry Rocks started in Studland Bay and en route to the rocks we passed by this small fortification that survives WWII. The bay was used as a site to undertake a dummy run of the **D Day landings**. One task was to unload tanks into floating canvas pods. One of the many stories of D Day was that of the 29 tanks released some 27 sank!

We are nearly done for this letter with a picture of us at Portland Bill.

Whilst taking this shot a large group of dolphins played in the surf close by before moving away.

On the **political front** Theresa May has the advantage of seeing her opposition parties in disarray but the focus remains on the European elections, Brexit and what will Trump do next. Wars and refugees occupy a great deal of press space as does the general matter of immigration and the "free" movement of people within the EU. It looks like too many and too quickly for most countries and thus the "free" bit might be restricted in the future. We shall all see how it works out in the months ahead. Economic news here is that the post Brexit position appears to be better than predicted, but for how long? I recently heard from a hardened ANC supporter from Jhb that he begins to favour the DA although offers no solution to the mass ANC vote in the poor rural areas. Time will reveal all.



That`s it. Farewell from me and goodbye from Bev.

