

10-17-97

A TASTE OF LONDON

A note from Michael Harper awaited us when we arrived at Oriel College. Michael has been living for several years in London while he continues his education and career in music. During the time he sang in the choir at Grace and Holy Trinity and completed his degree at V.C.U., we became friends. We had seen him briefly several summers in Richmond and looked forward to visiting him in London. He regretted that he would be on the continent during most of our stay at Oxford but hoped we could come to London the day before we left for home.

We chose to journey to London by train so that we could experience the British Railway system, even if only for such a short trip. Following Michael's instructions, we purchased a day-return ticket with Zone I of the Underground. Although the English insist that their trains always run late, our limited experience found them running precisely on time. When we went out to board our train, we were amazed to see the young man ahead of us nonchalantly take his bicycle aboard and stow it in what must have been a space just for bicycles. We enjoyed the scenery as we passed rapidly through many small towns with their colorful window boxes and close proximity to the tracks. We stopped briefly in Didcot Junction, the location of a large power plant that had the look of an atomic installation, but we later learned it was coal-fired. The closer we got to London the denser were the houses beside the track, mostly one and two-storied, although we did see some business and industrial buildings when we hurried through Reading. That side of England came as a shock, for we had not seen any industry in Oxford, although we knew that it is the home of the MG auto manufacturer, or in our forays outside Oxford into rural England. At one point during our hour-long trip a vendor pushed through with a heavily loaded cart, resembling those on airplanes, selling drinks, chips, and sandwiches. No conductor came along to check whether we had tickets either then or on the return trip.

In Paddington Station we had hardly stepped onto the platform before Michael appeared, wearing a heavy backpack of books which he apparently takes with him any time he leaves home so that he can study and work on a paper at odd moments. We had already decided with him to see part of the British Museum, so we immediately descended to the tube, the usual crowded subway station. Our train tickets gained us entry onto the platform and then were returned to us. On the subway, I took the only available seat, while Paul and Michael stood and talked. We changed trains, this time to a heavily loaded car, which characterized the usually crowded conditions of London that we saw from then on. On the street we found the sidewalks as crowded as they had been in Oxford except that in London everyone was in a city-induced rush. I would hate to try to retrace our route through the streets, but before long we were in front of the British Museum.

Michael is proud of his reading pass into the British Museum Library and wanted us to see inside. Because he introduced us as academics, we were able to make reservations for the next available tour, although we later had to abandon the idea because of lack of time. We walked about the Museum, seeing first the Elgin Marbles and other statuary from ancient Greece. Seeing those ancient carvings in person was far superior to viewing the photographs we had seen in books and

on television. Michael feels that they were stolen and, although he knows that they won't be, that they should be returned to Athens.



On our way to the oriental section of the Museum that Michael is especially fond of (unfortunately closed for renovation), we went through the manuscripts section, where we saw one of three existing copies of the Magna Carta and lingered over Wordsworth's manuscript of "Tintern Abbey," as well as Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner," one of Lamb's essays, and some original music scores by Haydn, Mozart, and other composers. Seeing the words and notes as the authors and composers originally wrote them, we found, produces a feeling for them that no contemporary, printed book or score can give us. It was tempting to spend more time there, but our time was limited.



And we were hot. All this time, on the train, on the tube, and in the Museum, we were more than uncomfortably aware of the humidity and heat, rivaling those in Richmond. Temperatures had been in the high eighties for several days, and, especially in the Museum, there is no circulation of air. On the underground, the closeness of many people added significantly to the heat. As we had already learned in Oxford, almost no place is artificially cooled. Therefore, we were pleasantly surprised to find a dining room within the Museum which was nicely air conditioned. It even offered iced water to drink. The cafeteria-style food service gave each of us our choice of a delicious light lunch, which we stretched out into a lively visit learning what Michael had been doing since we'd last seen him. He's begun to teach voice pupils and finds that he enjoys teaching, although his preference is still performing in recitals and operas. He's a counter tenor, an asset in England and the rest of Europe where counter tenors are in demand.

During lunch, Michael urged us to abandon the Museum for a visit to St. Paul's Cathedral where he has had opportunities to sing. A short underground ride took us to the crowded Cathedral, where some services were going on, although we never found them, as we and thousands of others milled about viewing the vast architectural details and seeing the ancient tombs surmounted by stone figures. I wish we could have heard a musical concert there; the acoustics in that soaring space are more than impressive, but we'll have to be satisfied with television and recorded concerts for now. (In Oxford we did find a CD of the St. Paul's Choir singing some of the Psalms we had enjoyed in Christ Church Cathedral. The acoustical effect of the soprano voices backed by male voices is much the same in both places.) It was time to return to Paddington Station for the return ride to Oxford. Michael had a voice lesson to give and Paul and I were approaching the time limit of our return ticket.



The return trip was no cooler than the streets of London, but at least there were fewer people. Back in Oxford we elected to ride a local bus back to Oriel College instead of the faster taxi we had taken to the station in the morning. I enjoyed watching rather than walking through the rush-hour going-home traffic on High Street, and I was tired enough to be grateful that the bus stopped just a half block from Oriel Street and home.

