

Travelogue, Part 1

A week-and-a-half into this retirement thing, I felt it was high time to give an update to my buds left behind, especially those of you still working for a living. How tiresome.

So greetings from somewhere in the UK! Actually, if you want to know where I am, you could try searching on a map for Belsize, which is in Chipperfield, which is in Rickmansworth, near London. I say "near" London, because it appears so on a map, but feels a world apart. My daughter's daily commute, starting from here on the northwest side of London, to a university also on the west side of London, is 2 hours each way!

When Dawn described "village life," I had imagined an actual village, with shops and eateries and pleasant strolls among the villagers and such. But no, this is an area of homes and farms and fields. The only establishment of any sort that is walkable from here is the pub that lies almost immediately next door. It goes without saying that we shall become well acquainted.

It is not that civilization is all that far -- it is a mere 2 miles to a lovely area just as I had imagined above, but you cannot walk there from here without trekking much of that distance on the pavement of the local "main drag," which is a non-starter for reasons I shall soon explain.

My daughter rises to catch a cab precisely at 6 a.m. each day, takes it to a metro station some 4 miles away, and transfers her way to her destination, reversing the process and getting home after 6:00 each night. This, despite the fact that she has a car, left here by her husband when he took his new job in Dubai. She no longer drives, having learned that doing so is illegal, which she was originally given to believe was a technicality of sorts, having exceeded the year's period during which her Arizona driver's license could be used.

This car, which was to have been our ticket to seeing the local environs, was itself left by a friend of Dawn's at the aforementioned metro station, a mere 4 miles from here in Croxley Green. After Dawn paid a few days' extra parking fare, Nancy and I ventured via cab to the station on our third day here to retrieve the car. We choose the middle of the day, far from any heavy traffic period, and set Nancy's "maps" function. I volunteered to drive.

Now, the roads in this part of the world are ancient, and have been modernized simply by having been paved at some point during the previous century. Originally laid out for pedestrians, livestock, and the occasional cart, they are amply broad enough at all points for two bicycles to comfortably pass each other, with thick hedges, solid trees, or the random stone wall penning you in on each side. Down these paths hurtle mostly compact vehicles, careening around curves with obscured visibility, encountering each other head-on.

Of course, I exaggerate. There is at every point at least 2-to-3 inches between side-view mirrors, so long as at least one of the vehicles is literally scraping the hedges or polishing the granite curbs. There is obviously an elaborate dance and sophisticated rules by which these

vehicles alternate slowing or embedding themselves into the hedges to allow the other car to pass. These rules are, however, beyond comprehension.

When in more civilized stretches through villages, rather than widen these suddenly busier streets, the locals compensate by allowing parking virtually anywhere, typically with one wheel over the curb, and the dance now includes indecipherable rules by which one lane of traffic or the other stops, far in advance of these blocks-long stretches of parked cars, to allow a caravan of opposing traffic to proceed. Notification regarding whose turn it is to proceed is communicated via telepathy.

Every other intersection or so one finds a roundabout, a remarkably efficient mechanism by which to move traffic. This efficiency, of course, depends upon knowing what on earth one is doing. One might think that being greeted by the "yield to traffic in the circle" sign would mean that one should yield. That was certainly the assumption I made, to the consternation of the line of drivers behind me. What it actually means is: don't enter the circle until you have enough room that the oncoming traffic has just enough space to brake so as not to crash into you.

Doing all of this while on the wrong side of the road, sitting on the wrong side of the car, crossing traffic to make right-hand turns, and shifting our manual transmission with the wrong hand, provided me with an exciting new challenge on that 4 mile drive home.

Admirably enough, I only ate the hedges 10 or 12 times during that initial drive home, whacked my left side mirror nearly off against a tree, and helpfully assisted in filling potholes with excess available rubber from our tires. My best achievement was the enlightenment that I inspired in Nancy, as I've never before heard her exclaim with such enthusiasm her appreciation for life in this world.

It's good that I've retired early, as that brief drive took two years off my life. Needless to say, Nancy has driven since, yet still infrequently, as each of those adventures takes another single year off what's left. Thus, we have been limited in our excursions, such as obtaining our SIM cards only a couple of days ago. These provide us with new UK phone numbers, which I'll list at the end of this communication, but which will do many of you no good whatsoever as there is no cell service here at all. With WiFi, however, those of you with iPhones may FaceTime us, although please, unlike my mom, do remember that we are 7 hours later than Arizona time (and it will be 8 hours once every other part of the civilized world goes to daylight savings).

Wait, why again, you may ask, is my daughter, who is well-accustomed to driving here, no longer driving? Because it is illegal to drive in the UK for longer than a year unless you have a UK license. At 500 pounds cost and with only a month to go, it's not worth it. She might still risk it and just drive anyway, but for an experience she and her husband had.

Minding their own business while driving one day, Anthony had to eat the hedges not to avoid an oncoming vehicle, but one that was literally flying through the air over their car, on a missile

trajectory to collide with others. Naturally curious about the outcome, they learned that the driver had been arrested for driving without a UK license after having lived here for more than a year. Not planning on using her car to fly, yet wishing to avoid imprisonment, Dawn has chosen to pass.

We forayed out again today out of necessity, given our 6 pillowcases stuffed with laundry that we had to schlep to the laundromat. "Wait," you may say, "you've been gone barely a week. How did you accumulate so much dirty laundry?"

Ah, that leads to the next part of the story.

Especially for those of you hoping to join us here at some point, I should describe our abode. This is a quaint little row house type of cottage, converted from an 1850s carriage house. It totals 700 square feet, I presume inclusive of the expansive 6-inch by 2-foot closet. Downstairs there is a tiny but cute art-deco fireplace, which we are required to fire up at least every other night, reportedly to help control dampness. And to light this fire we use? Why, good British coal. I'm not kidding. I'm making a fire with coal.

Excuse me, I believe that's Charles Dickens who has come calling at my door.

Upstairs are two bedrooms. We have the larger one -- the one with the expansive closet and a good foot or so space to circumnavigate the bed. When we were planning our trip, Dawn messaged us that when we arrived we would have to make the bed. "No problem," we thought, until we arrived to find the bed in pieces leaning up against the wall. We had to "make the bed," as in, follow the IKEA instructions to construct the thing. But I find I can follow directions better when there are no words, but merely hieroglyphics to instruct me, along with helpful corrections from Nancy.

The other bedroom neatly frames the other bed wall-to-wall, but it also contains the sole bathroom. That's right, my midnight pee trips involve tiptoeing past my sleeping adult daughter, rendered more acceptable by the absence of her husband in her bed, at least until he comes for a weekend next month.

These bedrooms are accessed by the narrow, and I swear 60 degree elevation staircase. This is no problem except for the fact that the first step down is immediately outside of both bedroom doors, rendering waking my daughter the least of my concerns during my slumbering pee trips. On the bright side, I may not need a repeat bone scan to test the progress of my osteoporosis. If, by the bottom of the stairs I am still intact, I should be good to go.

It really is a sweet little cottage, but for the beast.

As some of you may know, Dawn has for years had Belvedere, a well-behaved little Schnoodle. For a year, Belvis became the office dog at Nancy's workplace in Nevada. But now that Belvis is a Brit, he no longer has the run of the place to himself.

You are no doubt familiar with the British obsession with royalty, and royal bloodlines that extend back as far as can be discovered. Well, the same extends to pure bred dogs. Apparently, it's not just the offspring of cross-breeding that have discounted value, but the parents themselves, having violated protocol by succumbing to the pleasures of the fur with a breed other than their own, they lose value themselves. So when attempting to breed pure-breds, and two dogs with eyes for each other stray outside of their own kind, it is best to cover-up the transgression, and hustle off the newborns as quickly as possible.

Dawn and Anthony adopted such a puppy to add to their family. Juniper is the product of an English Spaniel and... wait for it... a Weimaraner. This 7 month-old puppy weighs some 40 pounds so far and feels like she outweighs me whenever she chooses to throw her weight around, which occurs roughly every 5 or 6 seconds.

First greeting me with her front paws seeming to reach my shoulders and a "kiss" not so much a lick as a nose plant into my face, she quickly presented me with the gift of my shoe, and we progressed from there. Given the chance, every cushion on the couch will be sent flying, and the stuffing joins the toys scattered across everything. I am treated to endless displays of WWE Wrestling matches between the dogs, and often am compelled to participate. This is basically non-stop unless Juniper gets hours of vigorous romping across nearby farmland, rain or shine (who am I kidding? It is always raining, unless it's sleeting). This serves to expend her energy nearly as much as mine.

Recognizing the advanced age of her father, Dawn has thoughtfully spared us from as much of this as possible, often walking the dogs alone, boarding both dogs during the day (a continuance of what she had been doing during the work day while she was alone), and enclosing them in a cage-like kennel for sleeping at night.

Each morning, perhaps half an hour after my daughter's 6 a.m. departure, I am woken by Juniper's "OMG I've got to poop right now!" whine. Stumbling my way downstairs I generally get to the front door just in time for her to step a foot or two outside before depositing copious puppy diarrhea on the front walk, but alas, not always in time. Even if outside, my choice is then to ignore the deposits and have them ultimately tracked back in, or do my best to scrape it up while still in my PJs in the freezing cold.

Both pooches then scamper upstairs, Belvis hoping to escape the madness and sleep with Nancy, Juniper hoping to touch every square inch of mattress around her before absconding with some article of clothing. I can usually manage to calm the beast down for a few moments of dozing on the couch during the morning, but otherwise must wrestle for a few hours until both dogs are off to doggie day care.

I am repeatedly and endlessly covered in dog slobber, tracked in mud, and who knows what those other fluids are. I thus have soiled more laundry than usual, leading to our aforementioned trip to the laundromat, which of course required another life-expending drive,

parking the car on the sidewalk and moving it three times, and a host of laundromat cultural lessons.

So just to pique my early retirement experience, we combined both driving and Juniper into a single adventure this week when we drove the dogs to the vet. Having just endured endless vaccines and other requirements to become British, Belvedere is required to repeat the process for the UAE. Of course, Juniper has to do it, too.

Despite the white-knuckle life-shortening aspect of riding in the passenger seat while Nancy drives (much, much better than I do), I at least have been able to assist in navigation between bouts of loss of sphincter control. But I could not do so while desperately wrestling the beast in the back seat to keep her from attempting to drive.

Thankfully, on the drive over to the vet, Dawn's father-in-law chauffeured us. I was especially grateful upon our transmigration of the "magic roundabout," which consists of a single large roundabout fed on all sides by 6 separate roundabouts, some of them one-way, some two-way, lanes of traffic crossing, and no stoplights involved. Roundabouts here go clockwise, unless others are feeding a central roundabout, which must then travel counter-clockwise, whose outer ring of traffic travels in the opposite direction. It's indescribable, especially at rush hour.

At one point during the vet visit, I was left for 20 minutes or so to constrain Juniper in the car while Belvis was with the vet. I mistakenly settled in for the usual wrestling match, until she caught me with a right hook that sent my glasses flying and myself wondering whether I still possessed lips.

Convinced I was now involved in MMA, I soon realized that Juniper could not abide even those rules as she landed several kicks which, as the British might describe it, were received "down low and full square."

Nancy then drove home admirably through rush hour. I am learning to just not look.

I remain alive, but not for long. So those of you who want to join us here may need to hurry!

Dawn is leaving us on March 12. The only firm dates we have for others being here are for Bobbie and Jack, here April 12 - May 5. We can handle more than one at a time as we have a sleeper futon sofa, and there is a "summer house" in the back with electricity and heat, but no plumbing. Thus, your late night pees may need to involve slogging through the mud before climbing the stairs and stepping past others sleeping. Either that, or chamber pots. :-P Or perhaps taking a cue from the dogs and watering the yard.

The easiest way to reach me is still through email: benglandaz@gmail.com .
The new phone number is: +44 7546 713781.

I owe some of you personal notes for the extraordinary send-off. Please forgive my delay. When I work up the courage to trek to a post office, I'll find out about actual snail mail across the pond, and send some of you long overdue thanks.

I hope y'all are doing well. I hope some of you can make it over here, and if not, I'll probably survive long enough to see you back in Arizona. Maybe.

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Travelogue, Part 2

Nearly all of Dawn's furniture and most other stuff are gone. On its way to a slow boat to Dubai. It's been gone nearly two weeks, and isn't even on that boat yet. Expected delivery there is sometime in the next few months. It's not exactly FedEx. Oh wait, FedEx once sent my priority overnight package on thousands of extra miles in a circle, so perhaps that's a bad analogy.

We did commit the massive cultural faux pas of not having lunch prepared for the movers. This required imploring the pub to fix us all lunch on a day that their kitchen is usually closed. The sandwiches and chips (read: fries) were admirable on short notice.

The day after the move, we had various thrift store items delivered, and added a few items purchased from Gumtree (the Craigslist of the U.K.), so this historic English cottage is now decorated in eclectic "charity shop" style. Fear not, we have pots to cook in and utensils to eat with, a table to eat at, plus a treasure trove of spices donated by my daughter. We can feed you if you come.

We also have the TV and the beds, so what more could you ask for? And our adventure now seems poised to terminate in a yard sale of some sort. Come join the fun!

We have had two more hair-raising adventures to the vet (one more to go), three more magical trips through the "magic roundabout," and a few shorter drives. Nancy has the hang of this. That's good, because I had created all sorts of elaborate plans with connections to various places that all began with the local bus that stops on our street, only to learn today that the bus company will discontinue this route on April 1. So I am left either on foot or throwing caution to the wind and relying upon Nan's driving prowess.

We hadn't driven for several days until a short hop recently, due to "the Beast from the East." Yes, that's a real thing. You can look it up in the news online.

The Beast from the East was an unusual weather pattern blowing cold air in from... Siberia. I'm not kidding. We had a Siberian storm. By British standards, this was awful, with days of sub-zero temperatures. In degrees centigrade, that is. The daily temps hovered between the low 20s and low 30s, as we know them. There was also massive snowfall. I think I saw drifts as high as 6 inches in spots.

So this was no "Nor'easter," but it was enough to create havoc here. Trains cancelled, highways blocked with hundreds of motorists hunkered down in their cars overnight, and so forth. We were treated to the usual news reporters on TV, pronouncing this the worst storm in anyone's memory, with scant snow, perfectly clear roads, and traffic moving behind them. Of course, the smaller roads (read: all the roads around here) did get icy and we were entertained on one outing to watching a van trying to climb a short hill over and over... backing up to get a running start, making it part way, then sliding backwards to the bottom. The only problem is that we also needed to climb that hill, on foot, and it did not appear to be the safest of routes while sharing it with the increasingly exasperated van driver.

Yes, we were out in this stuff. Every day. Out of necessity for the dogs and out of stir-craziness from being locked in the cottage. And we encounter many others on these outings, nearly all in the company of canines. This is quite some dog country. They are everywhere, and every establishment I've been to welcomes them. Not outside. Not "service animals only." Dogs everywhere, in every eating and drinking establishment. The most restrictive sign I've seen is "no dogs on the furniture." I've encountered one pub that prohibits small children, but not dogs. I don't think I've been to a pub with or without our own animals that didn't already have dogs there. And I've been to 8 pubs so far. Yes, despite my lack of transportation and with every one of them, save the one next door, more than a mile off, and despite rain, snow and perilous roads, I've sampled 8 pubs so far. Hey, I have my priorities.

So we have daily excursions to walk the dogs on various nearby fields, and on one of these routes lies a sign to the footpath to Chipperfield Common. So one day, Nan and I set off to find it, despite the winter weather. The Common is huge, mostly wooded, with footpaths everywhere. It is bounded on one edge by The Street. Not a street, "The Street" is the actual street name. I imagine that this was once a reasonable name as the area was bequeathed to the Dominican Black Friars by Edward II in exchange for "Fewel and other Necessaries" in 1316. The Street was probably the street.

Of course, the common contains two burial mounds that date from the Bronze Age, sometime between 2400 and 1500 BC. I so miss living in the "historic district" in Phoenix.

We found no stores on the Common, but at least three pubs. People here also have their priorities. The first of these we popped into was a historic appearing pub, "Two Brewers." I was gleeful in anticipation as all of the beer that I had so far sampled tasted has been... well, British. British beer is nearly all cask ale, somehow more flat than any cask ale I've had in the states, each of which has a distinctive and incredibly similar flavor. It is variety of the sort where someone feeling bored with their PBR might splurge and have a Hamm's, commenting upon the different notes it strikes upon the palate.

As it turns out, this alleged pair of brewers have managed to create... exactly one brew. Their "Two Brewer's Ale" is, I suspect, brewed for them by someone else, as it tastes decidedly like every other British ale I've had. And like so many, it's ~4% ABV. That's why the British drink pints -- they are all lower in alcohol than is common in the US. One beer I tried here was labeled as, "the stronger version of our popular session ale," at a whopping 4.5%. Two Brewers also had, as has every other pub I've seen, Greene King IPA, truly the Budweiser of IPAs. I am decidedly an ugly American beer snob. But I shall continue my quest! And to be honest, the local style is slowly growing on me.

Having at least warmed ourselves a bit, we ventured back toward home for a good half block or so, before ducking into the 2nd pub, Blackwell's Bistro. Outside, a plaque notes its history as having once been donated to Chipperfield as a community center. Upon entering, one finds -- a community center. The decor reminds one of a picturesque 1960s elementary school cafeteria.

The place seemed empty but for the near constant, seemingly random pounding upon the ceiling that we later discovered to be a horde of young girls upstairs allegedly learning Irish step dance. Realizing this made the randomness of the incessant pounding even more interesting.

At the white Formica counter, resembling a juke joint soda counter, behind which lay sweets and snacks, were also a few taps and other adult beverages. These looked incredibly out of place. But hey, we were here, so we took our drinks over to a couch and began browsing the local newsletters and flyers that laid about. We would have tried our hand at the pool table to the side but for the prominent sign that read, "Coffee and tea patrons only." No drunken billiards disputes in the community center!

Inspired by noticing more and more "footpath" signs, one day I took a map from a neighboring town and decided I would discover a safer route via footpath to a small market there, less than a couple of miles away.

There are footpaths everywhere here, it turns out. Although they are not so much paths as public access to various fields and farms. The map I was using had me opening gates onto farms and crossing large fields, for example, by crossing the middle of the field to "exit at one o'clock." One field led to another and another, through truly picturesque countryside, but all of which were private farms. I wasn't sure I was in the right place, or the right field rather, as I crossed fields that even contained livestock.

It's a thing here. The general public has access to lots of otherwise private fields. As I crossed a couple of these, I waved to the horses distantly off to the side.

Miraculously, I found my way to Sarratt, and to the local market. I loaded up with necessities (including two bottles of beer), and proceeded to retrace my steps home. It now began snowing and blowing in earnest, and was beginning to get dark, but it was only around 4:00 in the afternoon, so I had another hour or so before sunset. What could go wrong?

I was more than halfway home, past the point of no return, when upon entering the gate of one field, I noted that the four horses it contained were no longer off to the side where they had been before. They were now squarely in front of the gate on the opposite side. Exactly where I needed to be. Perhaps due to the frigid and blustery conditions, they were also quite animated, rearing up and mounting each other. But they were just horses, I knew, and domesticated ones at that, I assumed. As I began my approach from far across the field, they all stopped, turned, and eyed me with interest.

I was perhaps two thirds of the length of the field toward them when they began walking toward me at an earnest pace. As we approached each other, I realized that while perhaps not Clydesdales, these were hardly ponies. Any single leg of the largest one (the leader of the pack as they approached), probably outweighed me. None seemed particularly interested in my cooing and patting of them. Rather, they were focused on my grocery bag. I tried offering them a beer, but they didn't seem interested. Perhaps they shared my opinion of British beers.

I was closely escorted the rest of the way to the gate. A horse to either side, with horse breath from the others palpable upon my neck, somehow even through my scarf. They initially seemed disbelieving that any human would visit them in such inclement weather without treats, and then they became downright indignant about it. As we approached the gate, I worried how I would open it without an escapee accompanying me.

I had no reason to worry. I found this public access gate, through which I had entered perhaps an hour earlier, solidly padlocked. Feeling horse breath from four directions, with no egress, is an interesting experience, especially with the snow now blowing sideways and the light fading.

I hopped three fences, including one with barbed wire, like you'd imagine a man in his 60s might do, especially one spooked by perhaps the most gentle of domesticated animals. Safely in the next field, I waved back to my newfound friends, only to realize that I had dropped my glove somewhere amongst them. So I had offered them a gift after all.

A couple of days later, I set out in the opposite direction, for another market barely a mile distant. The obvious route to this market, however, involves walking on the street. In case you've forgotten, Part 1 of this travelogue makes clear why that's out of the question.

So during a break in the weather, I followed sidewalk and trail to a field where we'd previously run the dogs, and followed the footpath sign to the opposite end of the field. By this time, it had begun again to snow. At that end of the field there was clearly an exit onto a sidewalk which began at that point. This exit was, however, not exactly a gate.

A foot or two off the ground, there was a slight gap in the fence, surrounded by barbed wire that required one to bend at the waist, and slide through with one's body twisted into a right angle. On the other side laid the beckoning safety of the actual sidewalk. This put into perspective the other various gates and passages I had so far encountered, making them seem downright accessible.

At this point, it was snowing hard, so by the time I stumbled into the market, covered in mud and snow and blinded by the sudden fogging of my glasses inside, I received a long, silent, befuddled stare from a stunned customer. "Nice day for a walk," is all I managed to come up with.

On my way home, I chose a slightly longer, but more paved route, which took me past the third pub on Chipperfield Common, the Windmill. More dogs, and only a few patrons engaged in more droll, yet cheerful discussion in their British way. The proprietor was quite helpful in filling me in on the peculiarities of this fine establishment -- open for two hours over lunch, then not again until evening, during which time dinner is offered precisely from 18:00 until 19:30, but only by reservation, because should anyone be coming, he will have to locate a cook. His "Sunday roasts," a big thing in England, were highly recommended by him. He then phoned a customer, and I overheard him cancel this person's reservation because he had inadvertently overbooked for that night.

By this time, everything paved had become quite icy, so despite wanting to get home out of the cold as quickly as possible, I chose a more circuitous footpath, which provided more sure footing than down the long hill of ice that was the street. I exited the footpath to cross a small, triangle intersection, whereupon I instantly landed flat on my ass and slid across the street, just as a van approached. Thankfully, it took the other fork in the road, and as I watched it pass from my horizontal perch, I recognized it as a "Royal Mail" van. Yes, I had very nearly met my inglorious end at the hands of snail mail.

We have been to London a couple of times. We have official "Senior Rail Cards," that gives us transport and other discounts. We are gathering all sorts of useful information, such as that the trains run very late, but the station restrooms close surprisingly early. Upon returning to our most local station one night, prior to the short but always perilous drive home, Nancy sought in vain for a pot to pee in. Instead, back in the car preparing to drive, she found herself close to losing her self-control. No matter, I insisted, the car already smelled so much of the dogs that any additional aroma would never be noticed. But she insisted, despite the sub-freezing temperature, in marking our territory at the car park, so that we might always find our parking place. I suggested she smile for the security cameras.

Spending so much time with our daughter, Dawn, has been joyful. Our adjacent neighbors next door are incredibly welcoming and sweet. The pub crowd and other locals we've met have been lovely – well, perhaps there's another story in there. In any case, the offer to share space is serious. Shoot us an email. benglandaz@gmail.com . Or in case you don't trust me, hooknancy1@gmail.com .