



ANGLOPHILE VIGNETTES

FIFTY LITTLE STORIES ABOUT BRITAIN

BY JONATHAN THOMAS

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*Dedicated to all lovers of Britain, unable to go there.
We will be back. Until then, this book is for you.*

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INTRODUCTION

The book exists because of the Coronavirus. When ‘it’ started in full swing in early 2020, and we became locked down, I wanted to put out more articles on Anglotopia about Britain that could maybe help people cope with the situation. It would be a long time before any of us could go back to Britain (and of this writing, it’s still a no-go zone). Also I didn’t have a lot of spare time to write long articles, as I returned to the corporate world in 2020.

Anglophile Vignettes were born. Little stories about Britain. Little scenes from my twenty years of travel in the wonderful country that the United Kingdom gave to us. One technique I learned at a writing workshop a few years ago was to brainstorm and then write short scenes. These would become elements of larger works when the time was right. It was important just to get them written down.

Going through my writing notebook on my computer, I had lots of scenes that still hadn’t found a home in other works. Some I’d intended to be in my last book, *Adventures in Anglotopia*, but didn’t get used. Others I was just saving for the future. Now seemed as good a time as any.

So this book is a series of scenes. Some are very short, some are quite a bit longer. I have tried to space the long ones out, so you’d have a few short ones, then a long one to break everything up. There are a total of fifty Anglophile Vignettes in this book. About 2/3 of them were originally published on Anglotopia.net.; the rest I’ve ‘saved’ for this book and you can’t read them anywhere else.

Each little scene or story is like a meditation on something lovely about Britain. Almost like prayers - the prayers that we’re all having, hoping that we can all return to the country we love so much as soon as possible. It’s still going to be a while. So I want you to have this collection of memories, stories, and experiences to help take you there in your mind until you can go in person.

Happy Future Travels!

Jonathan Thomas
Publisher
Anglotopia



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The First Flight

I'm sitting on my deck, my kids are playing in the pool. A jet flies overhead. Then another. And another. I live under a flight path into O'Hare International Airport. Not only that, the planes also begin their descent right above me. They make a lot of noise. I don't mind. Whenever I hear the noise, I always look up. So many planes. So many people going somewhere. Occasionally a really big plane will fly over. Sometimes it will be from London or going to London. This is exciting to me, to think of a plane full of several hundred people all going to London or having just returned. I wish I was with them.

I wish this every time I hear a plane.

The international airline and iconic brand British Airways celebrated its 100th birthday last year. I'm going to celebrate my 20th anniversary flying the airline soon. It's weird to have a relationship with an airline, but I do. They haven't just flown me there they've been a silent partner in helping Anglotopia get to where it is today. I've been to Britain 20 times and, until 2018, every time I've flown to Britain I've flown on British Airways (the one time I didn't, I still booked it through them, so still counts, right?). It's as integral a part of my Anglophile experience as enjoying a cup of tea or watching a British TV show.

My first flight was in the halcyon days of summer 2001. Long before the September 11th attacks, long enough ago to remember what it was like to fly before that. It was a completely different experience than it is now. My first trip to London came about because my mother and I really wanted to go there and the trip would be my graduation present from high school (I was an excellent student). What made it affordable was a very convincing brochure that arrived in the mail from British Airways extolling what kind of deal we could get if we booked our whole trip with them.

It didn't take much to convince us.

We were so nerdy about that we loved hearing the British accent of the person on the phone when we booked the trip. We planned it for June 2001, right after school finished for the year. I don't remember how much it cost, but I remember it being exceptionally affordable (I would learn why later... when we checked into our hotel). This was back in the day when the airline still sent you actual plane tickets in the mail. I remember with great excitement opening the envelope with the BA Speedbird logo on it and finding our tickets, printed with my name, telling me I would be going to London. After an adolescence of watching Rick Steves on PBS,

I was finally ready to go on my own European adventure.

British Airways has been flying direct to London from Chicago for more than 60 years. They were one of the first transatlantic airlines to make the journey into America's Heartland. Those first flights, which took place on Boeing Stratocruisers, took almost 16 hours to get to London and required two refueling stops. Now, it's much quicker – depending on the jet stream you can get there in as little as 6 hours with no stops required.

I didn't know any of this on my first flight, though. I didn't know anything about British Airways's heritage. I didn't really know much about anything, to be fair. I was only seventeen years old. I just knew they were British, and they were going to take me to Britain for the first time.

We'd gotten to the airport ridiculously early. So early, the check-in desk wasn't open, and they couldn't yet take our bags. We waited like good patient Anglophiles at the front of the eventual line. This was my first time flying internationally and only my second time on an airplane. So everything about the experience was exciting and new and amazing. Most seasoned travelers would find it mundane. Even after 20 trips, I still find it exciting and amazing.

Our flight was BA296 on June 5th, 2001, the second of British Airways's two daily flights to/from Chicago. It was to depart at 8:15 pm, and we would arrive at 10:00 am London time. As we made our way through Security (quicker than it is now of course), we weaved our way to the gate that BA normally used, M11. And there she was.

A big, beautiful, white Boeing 747-400 gleaming in the late afternoon sun. I remember the paint was so white that it was almost blinding. She was clean. The BA 'Speedbird logo was shining in red, white and blue on the side. I couldn't wrap my head around how big the plane was. How did something so massive take off and essentially float through the air? Clearly, magic was used. The Union Jack on the tail warmed my Anglophile heart.

I watched with great excitement as the ground crews did their work – work they do every day, but work for me that was a novelty. Unloading cargo. Loading cargo. Loading bags. Taking the food onboard (would it be terrible?) and inspecting the engines and fueling up for the flight to London.

Every moment was exciting. Every announcement was exhilarating. In this instance, the journey was just as awe-inspiring as the destination. When our ticket was finally taken, and I was allowed to enter the jet bridge, I practically held my breath in anticipation. If this was living, then I always wanted to be this alive.

I shuffled with the other Economy passengers to the door. I was greeted by a British Airways person, resplendent in their blue uniform, who kindly took my ticket, looked at it and directed me to my seat. And then I set foot on a jumbo jet for the first time. It was noisy. The engines were loud, the air circulation was loud.

But amongst all the noise of the plane getting ready to go, and the people shuffling to their seats, and cabin crew talking, there was the quiet sound of classical music. The Flower Duet by Delibes. The official British Airways theme. I had a feeling of ecstasy, of arriving home for the first time. The 747 was bright, spacious and massive. My seventeen-year-old mind struggled to grasp just how large this aircraft was.

We passed through Business class, which had lie flat beds (an innovation that British Airways actually invented), then through World Traveler Plus (premium economy). And finally, we arrived at Coach (or World Traveler as BA euphemistically applies to it). Our seats were in the very back. It was a strange experience, getting on that plane and walking for what seemed like a mile all the way to the end.

I had a slight problem with it all, though. I was on the tail end of a head cold. When I was struck down with it a few days before the trip, I was in terror that it wouldn't go away before the trip, and it didn't. I was congested, I had a runny nose and a terrible headache. But nothing was going to cancel this trip, certainly not a cold. I bought medicine along with me, but nothing was working that well. The medicine would also ensure that I would not sleep that night.

My mother and I saw our row; I was in the window seat. She was next to me in the middle. Eventually, a kindly man filled out our row. The plane rocked and shook as things were put in the cargo hold and various things I had no concept of were done to this jumbo jet, far from its home in London.

Everything was a novelty. Everything was amazing. We had a little packet that had headphones, socks, eye mask, etc. We had inflight entertainment on the seats in front of us, which in 2001 was still a relatively new thing. The flight attendants were British, and they had the most marvelous accents, many of them different from each other. They handed out British newspapers.

It all went by in a blur. Before I knew it, we were taxiing for take-off. Our British pilot was telling us all about our expected arrival in London. How exciting it all was. And when we made that final turn onto the runway, and the four Rolls-Royce engines spooled up, and we were rocketed down the runway and into the air, I had a moment of clarity that, though I hadn't even arrived in Britain yet, if it was half as amazing as this was I would be in love forever.

I still had that cold to contend with. I tried and tried to sleep that first flight over, but I learned that I cannot sleep on airplanes (unless I'm lying down and, even then, not very well). My nose was running, made worse by the dry air. My legs would get sore. I have a small bladder, and every time I had to get up for the bathroom, I felt bad for the whole row of people who had to get out of my way (knowing this now, I always book an aisle seat).

But British Airways did everything right, something they do almost every day of the year. The flight was smooth. The entertainment worked. The food was edible. It went by in a flash. And when we landed in London, I simply could not believe that we were there. When we parked at a remote stand, I stepped off the stairway and onto the concrete of Heathrow. I was on English soil, finally after dreaming of going to England my whole childhood. I'd arrived. And a British Airways 747 had brought me there.



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Scriptum

I have many favorite places in Oxford. It's not hard to have many, it's such a beautiful and historic city with much to see and do. Even whittling down my top 10 things was difficult for an article I wrote in the past. By far, though, one of my favorite places is Scriptum. Located on Turl Street, this tiny little TARDIS of a shop is hard to classify, but I guess you would call it a stationery store.

But it's so much more than that.

It's such a perfect little business, located in the most perfect city if you like learning and scholarship. It's a store filled with the wonders of knowledge and creativity that western culture has produced. The biggest thing they stock is stationery, but not the kind of stationery you get at a local office supply superstore. This is quality stationery, made in small quantities, by craftspeople all over the world.

If you're looking for a blank book or journal or diary, this is the place to find it. They have literally every type you can imagine. Looking for a solid leather book to write in? They have it. Looking for a soft leather journal to carry around? They have it. Looking for something to take notes? They have it. And every single one is a beautiful object. Now, to be fair, you have to pay for this quality.

They have pens and paper and wax seals and everything a 'proper' writer needs to feel, well, proper. They have busts of famous literary and historical figures. When you walk around the store, it's a bit like being in a shop in Harry Potter's Diagon Alley. You can even buy quills if you are so inclined. The upstairs is filled with treasures, many you don't expect to find there – along with a collection of beautiful books.

As I write this the shop is closed due to Covid-19 but this is absolutely one of those places I hope returns as soon as they can. It's a treasure in Oxford and I cannot wait to return myself.



If You Have
Any Questions
Please Ask

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Old Minster Lovell Hall Ruin

It was our last day in the Cotswolds in Oxfordshire. We'd been staying in a nearby hotel, and everyone we encountered told us to see the ruin. So we went because I love a good ruin and if everyone says it's worth seeing then they might be right. Minster Lovell Hall is signposted on all the nearby roads. When driving down the street towards it, it's not clear where it is. It's a bit hidden. Which only adds to the charm.

We parked at the spot that was a makeshift car park. We geared up with our son in the stroller and walked down the leafy lane. It was a sunny and warm English early summer day in May. The birds cooed in the distance and you could hear the nearby River Windrush. It was a glorious day to be out for a stroll. There was a bit of pressure to see the ruin and move on to our next destination, as I always overpack our research trips with too much to do.

When in doubt follow the signs, and we approached a churchyard. No sign of a ruin. We entered the churchyard and sure enough, behind it, you could see the ruins come into view. We followed the path and there it was, old Minster Lovell Hall, long ago demolished and in pieces. I'm used to seeing old abbey/cathedral or castle ruins all over Britain, but a ruined house is a bit more special as they are rarer.

The house was an important manor hall for centuries in a strategic place along the River Windrush. The Lovell family lost the place after picking the wrong side during the Wars of the Roses. It passed through many hands since then, ending up in the hands of the Coke family. They abandoned the place and moved somewhere else. The house began to be demolished and some of its stones were turned into houses in the surrounding landscape. It has now been ruined longer than it was ever a functioning house.

There is still much left to see including the intricate brick floors and the dovecote, located a short walk away. The whole site is now in the care of English Heritage. Though, as with most places like this, the care is benign neglect. When we visited the garbage bins were overflowing and there were local teenagers sunbathing. Still, it was a lovely atmospheric place, the sounds of the nearby river were relaxing. It was a lovely setting and a lovely ruin, very much worth visiting.





RC



Hardknott Roman Fort

The reward for the most difficult drive I'd ever taken in my life was supposed to be a Roman ruin. Hardknott Roman Fort is in the middle of nowhere. To get there requires a drive over the Eskdale and Hardknott passes, two of the steepest roads in Britain (at one point the gradient is 30%). Of course, you can go the slow way around the Cumbrian coast, but why make it easy when you're rewarded with incredible views of the Cumbrian fells?

You do not do the Hardknott Pass quickly. It's a slow-going route that takes in small villages, busy towns, and countless hikers and bikers enjoying this beautiful Cumbrian landscape. It's not a route you can follow by driving fast. And that's fine. The slowness is a feature, not a bug. By not going fast, you're sure to savor the scenery around you, even while you're concentrating on driving through one of the most beautiful places I've ever been to.

As I crossed over the final crest of the Hardknott Pass, the old Roman fort came into view. Situated on a promontory with a clear view of the Irish Sea, you can see why the Romans chose this spot for their furthest outpost. It's really surprising how much of the ruin is still there. Much of it was pilfered by locals after the Romans left to build the stone walls that snake through the valley. The only thing that lives in this valley are sheep and they are the symphony soundtrack to your visit to this special place.

The site, now owned by English Heritage, has seen better days (I visited in 2018 so it may have improved by now). Many of the notice boards explaining what you were looking at were damaged or faded to the point you couldn't read them. Still, there was plenty to wander around and see. Most of the former walls were about shin or knee height. You have free rein to wander around and climb over whatever you want. This place has no admission charge, how could there be? Can you imagine the commute of someone who had to work an admission desk here every day?

The fort is beautiful. Stark. Abandoned. It's a hard place. It's exactly as the name describes. But more beautiful than the fort are the views from it. To the east is the Hardknott Pass, which snakes down into the valley, and one can't believe you just drove over it. To the west is the blue and emerald Irish Sea, a hard border for Roman influence in these parts of Britain. All around you are sheep and dry-stone walls. It's an English paradise, one of so many in this wonderful country that I love so much.







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Shadows of The Great War

It's the least sexy part of traveling, needing to get some cash. We'd just arrived in London with our 2-year old and our 6-month-old (this was in 2013). We were staying in a flat in Earl's Court and decided to walk down to Gloucester Road to find something to eat and an ATM. We were still a bit jet-lagged, so the walk would do us well. Anglotopia Jr was pleased as punch to stretch his little legs.

Serendipitously, we found the local branch of HSBC. Years earlier, in an attempt to feel more international, I'd set up an account with the HSBC subsidiary in America. It made getting wire transfers from the UK and using bank cards while traveling there much easier. And a good travel perk was that, when we actually traveled in the UK, our bank card was treated as a local card – so no ATM fees and the best interbank US/UK exchange rate.

For those that aren't familiar with it, HSBC is Britain's largest bank – despite the fact that, until 1997, it wasn't technically 'British' in a local sense – it used to be the Hong Kong Shanghai Bancorp but, when Hong Kong was handed back to the Chinese, the bank decided to do a reverse repatriation and move its corporate headquarters to the UK (it's still very international and calls itself the 'world's local bank'). The bank has a long and storied history and has been around for a very long time.

Anyway, I needed the ATM at the branch on Gloucester Road. We walked in, kids in tow and found the ATM and got the cash we needed effortlessly, it's always nice when something so simple works exactly the way it is supposed to. But something struck me about the bank, it was bustling to be sure. Near the window was a small memorial to staff members who had been lost in the Great War (World War I). It was a tiny little unassuming thing, but next to it were several clearly recently placed poppy wreaths. I was very moved at that moment.

It was one thing for the memorial to still be there after almost 100 years, Britain is filled with forgotten monuments everywhere. But it's another thing entirely for the staff at the bank, who probably aren't even connected to the same bank staff from the early 1900s in any way, and have no connection to who is being memorialized, to still take the time to honor the fallen, even in 2013. Even writing about it now, after all this time, makes me a little emotional. This is one of the things I love about Britain so much – the sense of history but also how that sense is wrapped up in never forgetting. World War I was a seminal event in British history that completely upended society (arguably more than WWII did). Every

year, across the country, on Armistice Day, people stop to remember, even after relatives who fought in it have been long dead.

They are never forgotten.

Even in a shiny corporate bank branch on Gloucester Road.