

END TO END

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End To End

Britain from Land's End to John o'Groats

By Jonathan Thomas

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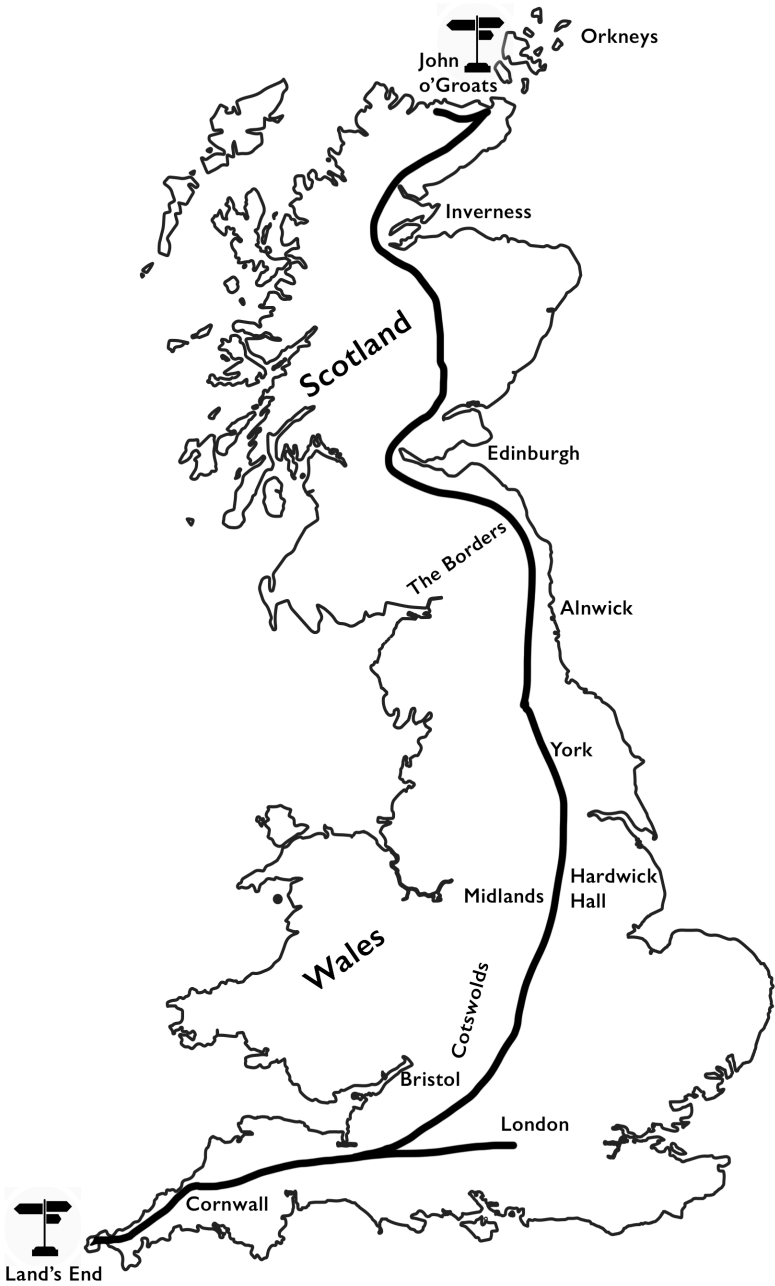
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DEDICATION

To Jackie, the best travel bestie a guy could ever hope for. The best part of this adventure was doing it with you.



Note: Map is not to scale, locations approximate

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**LANDS
END
2018**

NEW YORK 3147

JOHN O'GROATS 874

**ISLES OF SCILLY 28
LONGSHIPS LIGHTHOUSE 1½**

ANGLOTOPIA

17TH SEPTEMBER



INTRODUCTION

When we departed for our epic drive across Britain from Land's End in Cornwall to John o'Groats in Scotland in 2018, I did not know that it would be the last time I was able to visit Britain for four years. I wish I had. I would have savored every minute of that trip just a little bit more. I would have paused more to take in the landscapes. I would have spent longer at the castles and ruins we explored. I would have enjoyed every bite of British cuisine just a little bit more. I would have crammed four years of travel experiences back into those two weeks we spent driving from one end of Britain to another.

The idea of taking a drive from Land's End to John o'Groats was something I'd wanted to do as long as I knew it was something that people did. It was firmly at the top of my

Britain bucket list. But it was something we knew would be hard to manage - it would take a couple of weeks to do it properly. That meant it would be expensive, and it also meant we'd have to take a lot of time away from our kids and responsibilities at home. We generally tried to keep our journeys to Britain around a week, at most 10 days, as that was the most our young children could stand us being gone (and the most we could stand being away from them and, let's be frank, probably the most our trusted caretakers could stand to care for them!).

I'd filed away doing 'LeJog' into the things we would do far in the future, maybe once the kids were older. LeJog is the official shorthand acronym for travelling from Land's End to John o'Groats.

But then, of course, I was inspired.

Inspiration comes in many forms. Mine came from YouTube.

Two prominent YouTubers ran a major Kickstarter campaign to raise funds to do the nerdiest thing you could possibly imagine: travel to every train station in Britain (there are more than 2,500 of them). Run by a man obsessed with Britain's trains, it was a journey that would take them almost three months. One of them took a sabbatical from work to do the trip. Not only did they raise all the funds they needed to do the journey - and crucially cover the costs of producing dozens of YouTube videos about it - they raised more than their goal, which meant they could make even more videos and then a proper documentary about the journey when it was done.

I thought the whole thing was brilliant (in the British sense).

I love Britain's trains, so I was thrilled to watch their journey. But there was something more - I connected with the couple on a personal level. They were of a similar age to my

wife Jackie and me. They were very much in love with each other, as Jackie and I are. When the male of the couple did interviews about their trip - it was all over the headlines at the time because it was so WEIRD, and the British press loves weird - he kept saying the same quote over and over.

It was from Ernest Hemingway - one of my personal favorite writers (yes, there are things I love that aren't British - shocking revelation, I know). The quote was "never go on trips with anyone you do not love." And I thought that was a lovely sentiment. Even before we started our publication *Anglotopia*, Jackie and I traveled around Britain, and those travels were a crucial part of our love story. So many of our most wonderful experiences as a couple were during our travels around Britain.

So, what better way to repeat that than to peel away from our kids for two whole weeks and drive from one end of a history-filled country to another?

An idle conversation about doing something similar led to excited conversations about actually doing something similar. The sales pitch was simple. We could drive from Land's End to John o'Groats and take our time and do it properly. Think of the material we could get for the website and magazine (at the time, we ran a print magazine). Think of the experiences. Think of two whole weeks going from nice hotel to nice hotel, just us. Just us alone and in our love. Just us on an adventure.

Wouldn't that be great?

We put it on the calendar for September 2018.

But first, let's explore the history of travel around Britain, and then we'll begin our own journey from Land's End to John o'Groats.

Before Britons conquered one-quarter of the world, they first had to get to know their own island. Even as recently as a few hundred years ago, parts of Britain were so remote they might as well have been in Antarctica. People lived there, but they were people who barely considered themselves part of Great Britain. London was as far away mentally as Paris or Rome or Istanbul (if they even knew what those were). And I'm not talking about the remote people's not knowing anything about Great Britain; I'm talking about everyone else on the island. Life was restricted in Britain until the railways were built. You lived and died within a few miles of where you were born (and to be fair, most people to this day still do that). The first great explorers in British history didn't just set off to explore the oceans of Earth; they set off to explore the island of Great Britain itself. In some cases, no one had ever really thought to do such a thing!

As someone obsessed with Britain, I'm a bit obsessed with reading books or watching TV shows about people who've journeyed around Britain. It also turns out that Brits themselves love to read about their own country - especially when it's written by an acceptable outsider (American Bill Bryson is one of the few). Britain's literary heroes and other historical figures have a long history of journeying around their island and seeing what's there. Instead of visiting a foreign country, they'd visit Scotland, which was just as foreign as anywhere else in Britain.

For most of Britain's history, people didn't get around much. There was no such thing as tourism. Traveling was dangerous, and it was only done when necessary or under great protection. People didn't wake up one day, have an existential crisis about the struggles of current work/life balance, and go on a journey to a distant county. No, traveling around Britain just wasn't done. While the Romans left Britain a decent road

network, which was improved upon, the roads were often a muddy, dangerous mess.

In some cases, it was quicker to sail on a boat to get around Britain!

For millennia, people have wondered just what was on the island of Great Britain. It even piqued the interest of Caesar, who invaded and colonized it . When William the Conqueror took control of England in 1066, the first thing he did was commission an inventory of his new kingdom (now known as the Domesday Book) to find out what was there. For many places in Britain, this was the first time their names were recorded in written history. Even today, it's a mark of pride for villages and towns in England if they're mentioned in the Domesday Book.

In pre-Norman days, the only people traveling around on anything other than 'official' business would be monks. They were the first real tourists. While they had the mission to spread religion everywhere they went, they often found themselves in far-flung lands that most people would never find themselves in. And as they were usually the only literate people around, they were the first to write down their experiences.

It's not like they were keeping a blog of their travels, though.

Monks like the Venerable Bede or William of Malmesbury were some of Britain's first proper historians, and their books are a guide to life long past. They vividly describe places simply to describe them (and give their Christian importance.). William of Malmesbury is fascinating - he was a polymath born in Wiltshire. His great works were *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (Deeds of the English Kings) and *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum* (Deeds of the English Bishops) - the former a guide to English kings until that point around 1100 and the latter a

guide to famous English bishops. But it's his writing about places that is most interesting.

He said this about Shaftesbury, my favorite English town:

“Shaftesbury is only a town, though once it was a city. It is situated on a steep hill. Evidence of its antiquity is given by a stone in the chapter house of the nunnery. It was transferred there from the remains of the ancient wall and reads, ‘King Alfred built this town in 880, in the eighth year of his reign.’”

You have to admire his crisp, clear writing. What's most remarkable is that you could describe Shaftesbury like that today, and it would be exactly the same.

The next traveling monk worth mentioning is Gerald of Wales. He lived a positively international jet-set life - making several journeys all the way to Rome. Having demonstrated his usefulness to King Henry II, Gerald was selected to accompany the Archbishop of Canterbury, Baldwin of Forde, on a tour of Wales in 1188. The goal of the trip was to recruit soldiers for the Third Crusade, but it's his account of that journey, the *Itinerarium Cambriae* (1191) and the *Descriptio Cambriae* in 1119, which are the most long-lasting legacy of that trip.

On his journey during 1188 he completed a circuit around the whole edge of Wales, from beginning to end. His description of Barry Island, near Cardiff, and famous as the home of Stacey from the hit British rom-com *Gavin and Stacey* is positively delightful:

“Not far from Caerdyf is a small island situated near the shore of the Severn, called Barri, from St. Baroc who

formerly lived there and whose remains are deposited in a chapel overgrown with ivy, having been transferred to a coffin. From hence a noble family of the maritime parts of South Wales, who owned this island and the adjoining estates, received the name of de Barri. It is remarkable that, in a rock near the entrance of the island, there is a small cavity, to which, if the ear is applied, a noise is heard like that of smiths at work, the blowing of bellows, strokes of hammers, grinding of tools, and roaring of furnaces; and it might easily be imagined that such noises, which are continued at the ebb and flow of the tides, were occasioned by the influx of the sea under the cavities of the rocks.”

Nothing nicer has been said about Cardiff since! I jest, I jest. I can't find any evidence of Gerald finding any evidence of any temporal anomalies or sexy Americans trying to save the universe.

We have to fast forward a few centuries to find another notable traveler around Britain, John Leyland (or Leland). Leyland was not a monk but was educated and lived life rather like he was one - and his life was intertwined with the convulsions of Reformation Britain. He was a poet and is considered the father of English local history and bibliography. Many of the techniques he laid out are still used to this day when trying to write of the local history of places in Britain - he established the 'county' as the basic unit to study local history in England, which is still done today.

After the Dissolution of the Monasteries, Leland dedicated his life to hunting down important books, and that took him on journeys around most of Britain. Along the way, he took meticulous notes on what he saw, heard, and did. We

call this Itinerary, and when a new edition was published in the early 20th century, it ran to five volumes!

Here's an example of what he said about Fowey in Cornwall:

“Cornwall, there stands a poor fishing village called Bodennek. There is the passage or trajectus to Fowey. Miles above Bodennek into the land northward is a creek upon the north side, there is a sect monks of Monteguy, and is dedicat to S. Sirice and Juliet.”

But as Britain developed as a society and civilization, the blogging monk trend ended in the Middle Ages, as non-clergy began to make their way around Britain and write down what they saw. And women too. Celia Fiennes explored England on horseback, journeying the entire length and breadth of the country just to travel for its own sake. It was unheard of for men to do this, and even more, unheard of for a woman to do it, often alone. Why did she travel? She said it was to “regain my health by variety and change of air and exercise.” It doesn't sound much different from those who seek to travel to find themselves these days!

Fiennes worked up her notes into a travel memoir in 1702, which she never intended to be published. She wrote them for her family. Thankfully, they thought differently because her writings provide a vivid portrait of a still largely unenclosed English countryside with few and primitive roads. Extracts were published in 1812, and the first complete edition appeared in 1888 under the title *Through England on a Side Saddle*. Since then, her writings have never gone out of print.

Celia had various interests, including anything new and shiny in technologies. She particularly liked England's bustling

towns; such as the newly fashionable spa towns such as Bath and Harrogate, and capitalist commerce. Fiennes saw many of the finest baroque English country houses while they were still under construction. You may not realize that many stately homes have always been somewhat open to travelers; it's not a new pastime for Brits. Her comments are among the most interesting sources of information about them. At Stonehenge, she counted the exact number of stones, and at Harrogate visited "the sulfur or stinking spaw." She even clambered over the rocks at Land's End, just like we did. It's fascinating to be connecting with the history of fellow writers who have made the same journeys and same discoveries - that Britain is such a fascinating and varied place, with a beautiful landscape worth seeing for its own sake. I'm glad I'm not alone in this!

By far, the most well-known journey around Britain, however, is the one undertaken by Daniel Defoe. Yes, the author of *Robinson Crusoe* was an adventurer himself. His account of his various travels through the island of Great Britain became his bestselling work - and best known for Brits - while we know him best for *Robinson Crusoe*. The book was not a raw travelogue, but rather it was a compilation of a lifetime of travel around Britain. Defoe had a varied life. He was famous as a political pamphleteer and is often called the father of modern journalism. He was born as Daniel Foe in 1660, the son of a butcher in Stoke Newington in London, but used the grander sounding 'Defoe' as his pen name. He was arrested, pilloried, and imprisoned in 1703 for a pamphlet he wrote satirizing high church Tories. But it's his accounts of Britain that have stood the test of time.

He also visited Land's End and had this to say: "I am now at my journey's end; As to the islands of Scilly, which lye beyond the Land's End, I shall say something of them

presently: I must now return sur mes pas, as the French call it; tho' not literally so, for I shall not come back the same way I went; but as I have coasted the south shore to the Land's End, I shall come back by the north coast, and my observations in my return will furnish very well materials for a fourth letter."

Traveling around Britain started to become more common after this. It really took off when a chap named Thomas Cook had the idea to sell excursions on Britain's newfangled railways. They proved insanely popular, and Thomas Cook, the Travel Agency, was born (and it survived well into the 20th century, though it did not survive poor management, sadly). The advent of the railways led to an explosion of wandering around it. Traveling around Britain was no longer solely the preserve of the wealthy or the educated. Anyone who could afford to go on a train could get the experience. And it was with this that we see the birth of Britain's tourist industry and the advent of the first tourist traps and attractions. Many of the railways went to the seaside and deposited travelers there.

As Britain's railways developed and the road network was improved, it was no longer the rule for people to live and die where they were born. They could visit cities. They could visit special places like romantic ruins and castles. They could visit the seaside. They discovered an island of wonder all around them. They discovered the island we know of today as travelers around Britain. I'm sure they were just as excited as we are to learn what a wonderful place they lived in.

During the 20th century writers like H.V. Morton started writing about Britain with affection, taking a detailed look at the land they lived in. His works, like *In Search of England*, are must-reads for any Anglophile. And, of course, one mustn't forget Bill Bryson, the American who wrote *Notes from a Small Island*. In that book, Bryson was preparing to return to

America and set out on a journey all over Britain. It's one of the biggest-selling books about Britain ever written (its sequel is equally as good).

I only hope that my own scribblings can one day add to the canon of writers who've written about Britain. *Waves hello to the historian who managed to find an out-of-print copy of this book in an old library for his research.

ROUTE PLANNING

Planning this drive ourselves proved a challenge. One of the problems we ran into is that no one has actually written a guidebook about driving "LeJog," the official shorthand acronym for Land's End to John o'Groats. There are books about walking it. There are books about cycling it. I bought all of them but, if you're planning to drive, they're not much help. I also wanted to plan our route to take in a few things I've always wanted to see along the way - so we wouldn't necessarily be following the traditional routes people take for LeJog. Most routes plan it using the shortest possible route; I had other ideas.

So, planning was me with a big map on the dining room table with a pencil, circling things I'd always wanted to see, roughly following the LeJog route that The Great British Adventure Map recommends, but altering it when there was something I wanted to make sure we'd visit. We gave ourselves two weeks to make this journey. Good friends of ours offered to 'show us' Cornwall and that leg, so that would take three

full days (plus the drive down from Heathrow, but I'm getting ahead of myself).

To an American, an 800-mile drive doesn't sound that interesting. By American standards, an 800-mile car trip is a sneeze. It is not a long distance. You can do it in a day. Many people do LeJog in a day. But that 800 miles in Britain is different. Britain has a continent's worth of landscapes in the space of 800 miles. If you do it in a day, you would miss out so much. Even the television series *Top Gear* made the journey in a day. But a day is not enough and would not be enough for us.

After careful research, we decided on two weeks for the whole trip. The rough outline would be the first few days in Cornwall with our friends (they would fetch us from the airport and drive us down to Cornwall), then drive north to Bristol and pick up our own rental car, then from there hit the Cotswolds, then drive to Yorkshire. Then on from there to Northumbria. Then Edinburgh. Then north through Scotland, with two more stops, finishing in John o'Groats and then taking the Caledonian Sleeper train from Inverness back to London (with one final day in London). It would be a whirlwind.

That was not the traditional LeJog route, but it would be OUR route, and that's all it needed to be. We planned the trip to visit places we'd never been before. By this point, I'd been to Britain almost 20 times, and there was still so much of the country that I hadn't seen. This is something that people commenting on our website or our social media channels love to point out (you only ever go to Dorset or London, blah blah). We simply needed to explore new places. It would give us years of content worth writing about and years of pictures to share (when we planned this trip, I didn't plan to write a book about it - that came much later).

The entire trip was the biggest, most ambitious thing we did for Anglotopia up to that point. We'd see so many important sites, travel through many important landscapes, and FINALLY visit Scotland, something I'd wanted to do my entire life. This book is not a guidebook to the trip; it's about our journey and the places we encountered along the way (as an aside, there still isn't a good guidebook for driving LeJog, I suppose I should write one after this!).

In the weeks before the trip, I finalized our route and our hotels and stops for the night. When we tallied up the entire route, we'd be traveling well over 1,000 miles. We'd start at Heathrow. Drive southwest to Cornwall, then north from Cornwall up the spine of Britain, all the way to the tip top (well, not tip top - we didn't go to Dunnet Head). We'd start at the Thames, continue to the English Channel, and end with the North Sea winds blowing in our faces.



CHAPTER ONE

A VERY ENGLISH JOURNEY TO CORNWALL

It's a long drive from London Heathrow to Cornwall. But it's the best drive. Cornwall is a long way from everywhere, especially when you've had a nine-hour flight. The first part of our drive would be a bit odd because we wouldn't be doing any driving at all. Instead, our very good friends would be driving. As we'd never been to Cornwall and their family had a holiday cottage they planned to visit anyway, they offered to drive us to Cornwall and show us around. We'd pick up our car later in Bristol and continue on our way.

This was going to be a nice treat, as now I would not have to drive for five hours right after getting off a transatlantic flight.

This journey was old hat to our friends, so they were well prepared for a long journey. The car was fully fueled, they were packed, and they brought along a cooler with plenty of food and snacks for the drive. This was a pleasant surprise as we were starving, and they kept us well-fed and watered the entire journey. We like to joke that they're our surrogate English family, and it was like going down to Cornwall for a holiday with our parents.

When you travel to a place enough, you make friends. Sometimes deliberately, sometimes accidentally. We once rented a cottage in Shaftesbury, Dorset, for a stay on Gold Hill to fulfill a dream. The owners stopped by to meet us and wish us well. They stayed for hours as we chatted. Then we got together again for tea and chatted for hours. A friendship was born out of a strange set of transatlantic circumstances. Eventually, we visited their home and became friends. On more than one occasion, they've driven us around to see THEIR England.

We've shared countless cups of tea. And it's a good reminder that in my 20 years of travel around Britain, the most rewarding thing we've gotten out of it isn't seeing a bunch of pretty places or having a ton of fun experiences. It's making good, lifelong friends. It's one of the best unintended consequences of running the business that I do. It's a strange universe where you become good enough friends with somebody that they volunteer to drive you for five hours to Cornwall, then show you around for a few days.

I highly recommend you all get some good British friends. You won't regret it.

Making British friends enriches your travels around Britain so much - and gives you more reasons to come back, so you can hug them again. Chat with them again. Experience

the joys of life with them again. It's been over 1,000 days since this trip, I miss England every day, but I miss seeing our friends most of all.

It brings a smile to my face to think back to that day in September 2018, when our friends were waiting for us at the arrivals gate at Heathrow, just like in the film *Love Actually*, holding hot cups of tea for us.

The first part of the journey to Cornwall isn't that interesting, as you're just driving through suburban London but then, once you hit, say, Hampshire, the roads thin out, and you begin to see beautiful green countryside all around you. And we would be seeing a lot of it on that trip.

For many British people going to Cornwall was their first major holiday, especially for older generations, as going to Cornwall was equivalent to going abroad. It was as close to abroad as you could get in the days before cheap package holidays to Europe. And Cornwall was magical for the English because it was so far away. It was also a foreign place. They spoke their own strange version of English. It was filled with moody tales of smugglers, storms, and foggy moors. But there was also golden sunshine that in the summer seemed to last forever in the long hours of summer English sunlight. Windswept beaches filled with people. People swimming in the cold North Atlantic (some in wetsuits because the water is COLD). Tea and coffee in beachside cafés. A vibe of relaxation. Cornwall is a fantasy.

And I was very excited to finally see it for myself.

There's something elemental and a bit of a shared cultural experience around a long car trip to a far-distant destination. Cornwall was the holiday destination for Brits, the same way that Americans would go to Disneyland or drive along Route 66. Where the long journey to get there is a part

of the going as the actual experiences that you have when you reach your actual destination. No one remembers the thrills of the roller coaster; they remember wiling away long hours on the road - in some cases, extremely bored (or bickering with a sibling).

I'm happy to report that nobody fell asleep on our journey down to Cornwall! We always have great conversations with our English friends, plus the ample food and, eventually, cups of tea. It was a massive fun drive down, and I'm so glad that we didn't do it by ourselves, jet-lagged, or take the overnight Cornish Riviera sleeper train.

All along the way to Cornwall there are landmarks that people recollect that are more remembered for the anticipation of getting to them than the actuality of seeing them. It's much like when you drive from Chicago to Atlanta and you see the signs for Ruby Falls or Rock City. The one time you actually stop to see these tourist traps, inevitably, you end up disappointed. Yet you don't regret stopping. The journey to Cornwall has similar experiences. There's a brief view of Stonehenge. There's the mystical Jamaica Inn, made famous by Daphne du Maurier in the novel of the same name (of course, we stopped briefly, enough for me to get a picture).

The most rewarding aspect of this journey to Cornwall was that it felt like we were kids, going on a holiday to the seaside. Everything was a new experience. We had no idea what to expect when we got to Cornwall. We just knew it would be nice. As a student of British culture, I'm hungry for the type of experiences that British people have in their lives. Christmas. Half-term. Guy Fawkes Night. Experiencing these things helps me have a greater understanding of them and helps fulfill that fleeting wish that I'd grown up in Britain but didn't.

I never had these experiences growing up, but our

English friends who drove us to Cornwall did their best to give us an approximation of the experience of the anticipation of driving there for a holiday experience at the seaside, and I couldn't help but feel nostalgia for a childhood I never had. Thinking back on it now, four years later, it almost pains me to tears from the nostalgic joy of those times. But that wouldn't be a stiff upper lip, then, would it? But I think of this drive often, and I'm filled with warmth remembering our English friends telling us about their memories of their childhood journeys to Cornwall and how things have changed a lot and how much of it hadn't changed. Some things are universal.

It was the perfect way to begin our grand adventure.



PIZZA

CHAPTER TWO

THE POLURRIAN PACKET

I don't know if I've said this before, but the roads in Britain are not straight. There are straight roads, sure - the straightest ones were built by the Romans and still exist. But the default shape of the roads in Britain is not straight. They follow the contours of the ever-changing landscape. Up and down. Left and right. Down and up. Right and left. Endless bends.

The motorways of Britain do their best to get rid of a lot of these quirks and variations through the sheer will of blasting through the landscape. But when you get off the motorways and dual carriageways (a divided highway) and onto smaller country roads, you are presented with a very different kind of driving. You're not even guaranteed to have two lanes on every

road.

And the roads will never, ever be straight.

My wife and I come from the Midwest. Most of the Midwest was laid out in a tidy little grid when it was first surveyed after the American Revolution. And that grid turned into a grid of roads. It being a largely flat and easy-to-navigate landscape, most of our roads are straight. They go in either of two directions, north and south, or east and west. British roads, being hundreds of years older and following a landscape that is almost never flat, can go north, south, east, and west on the SAME ROAD.

Once we left the motorway somewhere in the West Country, the final leg of our journey to Cornwall was on country lanes that would test the stomachs of two people who'd just arrived in England off a transatlantic flight and were both tired and hungry.

After stopping for some fresh air and brief pictures when we arrived at the Cornish coast and saw the sea for the first time, we headed for our hotel. When we planned the trip, our criteria for the hotel was simple: we wanted to be in a hotel on the sea. Not hard to do in a county surrounded by sea on three sides.

The Polurrian on the Lizard was recommended to us by our hosts and would be our base for the next three nights. The hotel is a luxurious retreat nestled on the rugged coast of Cornwall. With breathtaking views of the Atlantic Ocean, this historic hotel has been a favorite of travelers for over a century. Originally built in 1900 as a private residence, the Polurrian was converted into a hotel in the 1920s and has been a beloved destination for discerning travelers ever since.

The hotel's stunning location on the Lizard Peninsula offers guests a unique opportunity to explore the wild and

beautiful Cornish coastline. From the hotel's gardens, guests can enjoy panoramic views of the sea and the rugged cliffs, while the nearby beaches offer opportunities for swimming, surfing, and sunbathing.

Inside, the Polurrian on the Lizard is just as impressive. The hotel's elegant rooms and suites are furnished with antique furniture and modern amenities, providing guests with a comfortable and luxurious stay. Over the years, the Polurrian has played host to many famous guests, including Winston Churchill, who stayed at the hotel during World War II.

When we arrived at the hotel, we were almost too tired to notice the surroundings. But when we entered our hotel room (which was rather sparse but nice), the first thing we did was look out the window. We had a sea view. We opened it immediately and could hear the waves crashing against the cliffs below, we immediately caught a chill breeze, which was refreshing. We had some time to settle in and rest before leaving for dinner with our hosts later.

And it's at this point in the trip that I made a discovery that would change our lives and our business, just a little bit at least. We desperately needed a cup of tea to perk us up. We needed to stay awake until the evening, or else the jet lag would win. We needed a nice strong cuppa. Most hotels in England will provide you with everything you need to make a cuppa.

Most will offer a local tea.

The Polurrian offered a tea we'd never had before: Cornish Tea. Its teabags are orange, with a stark black logo. It was the only tea option on offer. So, we boiled the kettle and made some tea while we unpacked and listened to the ocean outside. Once the tea was cool enough to drink, my eyes went wide, and I looked at Jackie.

"This tea is amazing," I said, taking another sip.

“Yes, it is,” she concurred, taking her own sip.

“It’s smooth and delicious and refreshing.”

Tea loyalty is a strong thing with Brits, and with this particular Anglophile. My favorite tea at that point was Yorkshire tea (and it’s still my morning drink).

“I’m in love,” I said. Jackie rolled her eyes.

For the rest of our time in Cornwall, the only tea on offer pretty much everywhere in Cornwall was this Cornish Tea. I drank it at every opportunity. I bought a box and was sure to bring it home. It became my after-lunch tea of choice. Then I ran out, but I was already addicted. I needed more of it!

After some research, it appeared that no one sold Cornish Tea in the USA. HOW WOULD I GET MORE?!?!?!?

Well, I did what any other self-respecting owner of a business that already imported British products to the USA would do. I contacted them and wondered if they would wholesale to us and ship to the USA. They were delighted to, as long as we were willing to pay the high shipping costs and import duties and deal with all the paperwork.

Within days, I had dozens of boxes of Cornish Tea. I listed it for sale on our online store and sold out practically within a day. It turns out there was a great demand for Cornish tea in the USA! We’ve now been stocking it for almost five years, and it’s always a brisk seller.

And I always have a ready personal supply of Cornish Tea because this business owner always saves a few boxes for himself.

I’m getting ahead of myself.

Back to Cornwall.

Another thing we discovered was the concept of non-refrigerated milk. Most hotels will give you room temperature, shelf-stable milk to put in your tea. It’s not that different from

the creamers we have in the USA, except it's actual milk. It's called UHT milk, or ultra-high-processed milk. The milk goes through extra processing that completely sterilizes it and makes it shelf-stable for months. Every hotel in Britain will have these on offer. While nothing beats fresh milk, it's good enough.

Some Brits will sneer at the UHT milk as not good enough to put in tea.

When we mentioned that unusual milk to our hosts, they told us what they do when traveling.

"We put a creamer full of milk in the sink in the bathroom with some ice," he said.

A very British solution to a British problem, real milk for your tea while traveling.

As we enjoyed our tea, a piece of paper was slipped under the door. On it, it said *The Polurrian Packet*, and it appeared to be the hotel's own newsletter. It featured interesting history about the hotel, but it also showed current beach conditions, and the weather forecast. It was a delightful little thing, and I applaud that hotel employee who probably had the thankless task of putting it together.

It also introduced me to a word I'd never heard before. Under the weather conditions, it said it would be a bit 'mizzly.'

Curious, I asked our hosts later what that meant, and basically, it means it's rainy, but not pouring, and the drops are small. It's cloudy, and you basically feel like you're walking through a cloud. Apparently, it's like this a lot in Cornwall (yet it's a Scottish word). On the day we arrived, it was definitely a bit mizzly. But one thing you learn about Cornwall is that, while it could be mizzly at any given time, the sun could also shine at any time. The weather in Cornwall is beautiful and prone to change based on the moods of the Atlantic Ocean.

After our rest and refreshments, it was time for dinner.

But that meant getting back on the twisty, turny roads again. This time, we were heading for one of the oldest estates in Cornwall, Trelowarren, home to the Vyvyan Family, who've lived there for nearly 600 years. At the time, the 'Lord' of the estate was a young 18-year-old who liked pizza, so he installed a brick pizza oven in an old barn. He'd created a lovely little ad-hoc pizzeria in the middle of the Cornish countryside. The pizza was delicious, and the surroundings of a crumbling romantic Cornish estate were right out of Poldark (more on that later). As of the third edit of this book, a new couple runs the café, but they still serve fresh pizzas.

The weather in Cornwall was cool that night, and the wood-burning fire at the pizza place was very welcome. It kept us warm for our first Cornish twilight, but it was also a sign of things to come - the weather was going to be colder than we planned, and there was going to be a storm. Still, there's not quite anything more pleasurable than enjoying good artisan pizza on a crumbling English estate with good friends by the fire.



CHAPTER THREE

A PLACE OF LEGEND AND FANTASY

Deep in the mists of time, legend has it that the island that St Michael's Mounts sits upon was constructed by a giant named Cormoran. Cormoran was allegedly 18 feet tall, and he supposedly took massive blocks of granite from the mainland and used them to construct the island and his lair (along with his giantess of a wife). He lorded over the island as his own domain but treated the mainland as his hunting ground. He was a nuisance to the locals. He would steal their cattle, their chickens, and sometimes their children, to satisfy his almost unquenchable appetite.

Eventually, they had enough.

A farmer's boy named Jack decided to do something about it (in some versions of the story, the local council asks him to do it). He comes up with a cunning plan to trap the

giant. He digs a big hole in the ground and hides it. Then with the confidence we should all have before we do an impossible task, he blows a horn to summon the giant from his lair. As Cormoran comes after Jack, presumably thinking he looks like a tasty snack, in his haste, he does not notice the hidden hole and then falls to his death as the tide rolls in to doom him to a salty, watery grave. On the stairs that take you up to the castle today, there is a heart-shaped rock that is claimed to be the giant's heart, forever encased in the stone of the place.

It's a grand story and the type of beguiling tale that makes English legends live in the popular American imagination. I remember reading a few years ago that the bones of a very large man, said to be 10 feet tall, were once found in the dungeons of St Michael's Mount. As with many legends, perhaps there was an element of truth.

It was stories like this that attracted me to St Michael's Mount. I'd read about the place for years. It's one of the most photographed places in Britain. A granite hunk sitting in a beautiful Cornish bay. It's a place that is easy to photograph and make look beautiful even in the gloom that surrounds it most of the year.

When we planned this drive, I knew we had to finally make a point to visit this special place. It was the first thing I wrote down when we were deciding on our Cornwall itinerary.

It's always quite something to see a place you've dreamed of for years with your own eyes. We'd set out early with our hosts so that we could cram in as much as we could that day. The Mount was to be our first stop. Even with an early start, Marazion, the town where the Mount is connected, was almost an hour away. We had a pretty but gloomy drive along the coastal road. And without even realizing how close we were to it, the island appeared in view as we rounded a bend.

Our driver helpfully stopped at a convenient pull-off (or lay-by as they are called in Britain) so that I could take pictures. I was there, finally. We drove on down into Marazion and parked in the car park. It was a cold and blustery September day. The tide was in, so there would be no walking to the mount today, we would have to take a boat. The weather was turning, and an Atlantic storm was due to hit the next day. You could feel Cornwall bracing for it in the air. One got the feeling that the whole town was battening down the hatches.

I'd never been on the sea before. In 20 trips to the UK, I've only ever flown over the ocean, I've never been on it. The only boats I've been on have been on small lakes and on the Chicago River in the American Midwest. It's not that I was afraid of it or worried about seasickness. I just never had the chance. I finally had the opportunity to go out on the sea. And it was lovely.

The signs in Marazion direct you down to the seafront, where a stone weir recedes into the bay. When the tide is low, you can take a leisurely walk across the bay along a cobbled path. That morning, the tide was high, and the bay was very choppy due to that incoming storm. The island hadn't been closed yet. We watched as the first boat came across the bay, it appeared slowly, and then it was right in front of us. The boatmen helped everyone on board, and we paid our fare (it was £2, I believe, per person).

And with that, I was on a boat, on the sea. Well, if you count Mount's Bay as being the sea. Immediately it was like being on a roller coaster. The boatmen turned the boat around and pushed the throttle to its maximum, and we began the crossing. Thankfully the boat was covered; otherwise, we would have been soaked as the boat smacked into the waves as it crossed. Up and down. The noise was so loud we could barely

hear ourselves talk. Up and down. Up and down. Left and right. We occasionally smacked our bodies into the side of the boat. No one was brave enough to stand except the boatmen, whose legs were steady as tree trunks. Thankfully, I have a strong stomach and didn't get seasick.

The crossing took only ten minutes. It was rough, but fun. Halfway across, I mentioned to Jackie that this was the first time I'd been on the sea, and she was surprised – even after almost 20 years together, we still managed to surprise each other. It wasn't long until the water began to soften as we entered the sheltered harbor on St Michael's Mount. The boat softly touched the harbor wall, and we all claimed off. My legs were surprisingly steady. The crossing over had been exhilarating. But it was time for a cup of tea.

On one hand, we had to stop for tea because the castle wasn't yet open, so we needed to kill a little bit of time. On the other hand, stopping for tea is something we always make an effort to do when we're traveling across Britain. Why? Because it's how the British see their country. They divide their day when out and about by when they can have a cup of tea. Tea punctuates the day as a refreshment. It's an opportunity to stop and enjoy the company you're with. To get a caffeine injection. To talk about what you're doing. To enjoy your surroundings. And, most important of all, to have a piece of cake.

The entire economy of Britain is arranged in a way for British people to be able to get a cup of tea. You can get one ANYWHERE. I don't mean there are Starbucks everywhere (because, of course there are). No, most places people spend more than a little bit of time in will have a place to get a cup of tea. You'll find tea in the strangest places. A great British pastime is visiting the local garden center. It's not just a place where you buy some plants and landscaping materials. It's

a place you can spend the day at. There's a shop. There are restrooms. There's a café or restaurant. The quality of the tea is VERY important. If it's bad or too expensive, the business will fail! I've even been in an antique store in an old warehouse in Dorchester, and guess what they had in the place? A small café to get a cuppa.

When we're back home in the Midwest, and we're planning to be out for the day, I now plan my day around when I can have my morning and afternoon cuppa (if I don't, I'll want to take a nap!). I always make note of where we can get tea nearby, but as America has something to learn about serving proper tea, I often bring my own tea with me. In the back of my car, I have a small woodfired kettle and everything needed to make a cup of tea, in a pinch. Once, I was in a store, and found the most British invention ever: a car tea kettle. The store owner made clear they sell a lot of them.

There is nothing more sublime and pleasurable than sitting in a busy National Trust café and enjoying a hot cup of tea and a piece of cake or a brownie. They're almost always busy and filled with the noise of people enjoying their day out and the clinking of teacups, whistling of kettles, and the clang of cutlery. Some of my happiest memories of our travels across Britain are while we were resting for a cuppa. It's an especially nice respite when it's raining outside or particularly cold. Sometimes, we'll stop at an attraction just to have a nice cup of tea even if the place is closed for the season (but the café is still open).

The St Michael's Mount café was just opening, but happy enough to serve tea and cake. We sat outside and watched the choppy waters of the bay we'd just crossed. We were protected from the harsh winds by the solid rock island behind us. But there was a buzz in the air of the approaching

storm. It was chillier than we'd expected so the warm tea was a welcome respite as we looked at the long climb we would have to get up to the castle. Tea was fortitude.

Once time had passed the massive wooden gates to the path up to the castle were opened, and it was time to make our climb.

St Michael's Mount is genuinely stunning in reality. You don't really get an idea of its scale from pictures of the place. Standing on the harbor wall, you look up, and the castle is a distant climb up a massive hill. The island is bigger than you expected, and the castle is up higher than you imagined. Then you realize you have to walk all the way to the top of that hill to get to the castle. Tea was definitely required first.

A former medieval monastery that is now a sprawling castle set atop an offshore island seems very much like the setting of a fairy tale. But the tumultuous Middle Ages, Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries, and more contemporary British crises such as World War II, have made St Michael's Mount an important historical stronghold, scenic but strategic. Today, St Michael's Mount offers visitors a picturesque castle, well preserved but also much altered over the centuries, and elegant sub-tropical gardens with a pretty harbor below.

There is evidence that St Michael's Mount was inhabited at least as early as the Neolithic era (circa 4000-2500 BCE). It may have been used as a trading port for continental merchants picking up Cornish tin bound for the Mediterranean during the first few centuries AD. According to Christian legend, St Michael appears on the rocks on the mount in 495 AD to warn local fishermen of the dangerous local stones. This connection to a saint would help turn the mount into a pilgrimage site.

Edward the Confessor gave the Mount to the Norman abbey of Mont Saint-Michel, another famous island village

in France, almost directly across the sea. Benedictine monks from this abbey were invited to establish a priory in Cornwall, an invitation they accepted and, over the next few centuries, carefully and painstakingly built their church.

In 1425, the monks also laid a rough causeway that, at ebb tide, makes the mount accessible on foot from the landward side. The monks lived in peace for a number of years until St Michael's Mount became a strategic base for Perkin Warbeck, a pretender to the throne of King Henry VII. After Warbeck's failed rebellion during the War of the Roses, he sought refuge in St Michael's Mount.

Following King Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries (1536-1540), St Michael's Mount was occupied by a number of crown-approved military governors who kept the fortified island in good shape and defended it against Parliamentary forces who tried to take it in 1642 during the English Civil Wars. Their victory was short-lived as St Michael's Mount was surrendered to Parliamentary forces in 1646 and fell under the command of John St Aubyn, a Parliamentary colonel who was nominated governor and began to adapt the existing building on the mount, part monastery, part castle, into a residence. The family still live in the castle to this day. Descendants of John St Aubyn, the Lords St Levan, live at St Michael's Mount and are responsible for the many architectural transformations the building has undergone.

Some parts of the medieval incarnation of St Michael's Mount remain, such as the gatehouse, the converted Lady Chapel, and the church and refectory with garrison quarters underneath. The church is thought to date back to the 13th century, and St Michael's chapel to the 15th. What was initially the monastic refectory, built in the 12th century, became the Tudor Great Hall and features a magnificent arch-braced

roof. This roof was restored in the 19th century, at which point the room entered the third stage of its existence and became known as the Chevy Chase Room. This name comes from the incredible plaster friezes of hunting scenes that line its walls. A Jacobean oak table with a full set of monastic chairs completes the imposing effect.

The most revered room at St Michael's Mount is the old monastic Lady Chapel, which was converted into a glorious drawing room during the mid-18th century. With views from the north terrace of the very summit of the island, this carefully conserved Georgian treat has interiors in the style of Strawberry Hill Gothic, featuring pretty, pale blue and white ornamentation and a significant landscape of the mount itself by artist John Opie.

The rest of the castle displays the old barracks and museum rooms. Several other buildings can be found dotted around the castle, including a row of late 19th-century houses known as Elizabeth Terrace, some of which are occupied by castle employees. You will also find the former stables, laundry, steward's house, and two former inns.

But to see all of this, we would first have to climb the Pilgrim's steps to get to the castle. After our refreshing tea and cake break, we began the trek up the hill. We took our time, it would take a while, and it was steep. This notoriously out-of-shape American would have to take it easy. It did not help that the cobbles were wet and slippery.

We slowly made our way up the hill, following in the footsteps of pilgrims in the days of old who came here to visit the shrine of St Michael. As we climbed, we got closer and closer to the castle, and its immense size became much clearer. The path up the hill follows a curve as it brings you around to the other side of the island. Up close, the castle very much

looked like it was a much a part of the island and the very rock it sat on. It didn't look built on the rock, it looked like it was the rock, carved from it. When we finally reached the top, we were exposed to the sea and the wind straight off the Atlantic Ocean, which we had not experienced on the other side of the island.

The wind was blustery, and at the very edge of the ramparts, we struggled a bit to stand up straight against the wind. A storm was definitely coming. And the island was bracing for it as it has done for centuries. The castle entrance was covered in scaffolding, a common sight for places as old as this which require constant maintenance. We made our way into the castle and out of the wind.

It was immediately much quieter. The stone of the old castle walls shut out the oncoming storm outside. It was crazy to think that even when the storm really got going, you would probably barely notice it within these thick stone walls.

The castle is not a grand house by any means. Thankfully it wasn't crowded that day, because if there had been just a few more people it would have been difficult to get around. There are few grand rooms in the castle, at least open to the public. The Chevy Chase room was probably the 'grandest' room. It's very clear as you wander around that this was a castle and has always been a castle and a very functional military installation until it was made into some kind of home for the lords of the island.

The island was given to the National Trust in the 20th century, but the St Aubyn family worked out an advantageous deal with the Trust where they could continue to lease the castle (and live in it) while continuing to run the business side of the island. So, you have this strange experience of visiting a National Trust property that's also a private enterprise. The experience is slightly different than you would get at most other

Trust properties - such as a lack of NT branding throughout the place. The family still lives here, and the current Lord lives in his castle, even if it is no longer technically his.

We made our way through the rooms in the castle and then found ourselves outside again, even higher up than we were before. The wind was getting stronger. All the video I shot at this stage was useless because of the sound of the wind. We found the highest point on the island, which is itself embedded in the castle wall, proving that the castle is more a part of the mountain than a separate structure. You're supposed to touch the spot and make a wish. Jackie and I dutifully did so (our wish is our secret!).

The chapel was probably my favorite part of the Mount. A lovely little atmospheric place. They had choral music playing inside from a speaker, and it really set the mood. We stayed for a minute to take in the place. I'm not religious, but I always find the peace of these places fulfilling in my own way.

Before we knew it, we'd seen all the castle had to offer and it was time to head back down the hill. We overheard one of the guides saying that they would be closing soon to shut the castle and prepare for the arrival of the storm. We'd visited just in time. Soon, the island would be cut off from the mainland for a few days. Lord St Aubyn's island would return to his lonely care, as the island stood silent sentry against whatever the storm sent his way.

What a romantic thought.

Though he would probably stand in his great hall, watching the waves lashing his famous garden below, and worry about the fall in admissions and how that would affect his annual revenue.

Still, I would happily trade places with him.

I did not look back at the Mount as we drove away from

Marazion. I fell under the spell of the place, and I knew that I would have to return. Maybe that time to take a walk on the ancient path that leads from the mainland to the island.