

## Traveling to Britain Makes Pence to Me

By Tracey Hayes

My first visit to Britain loomed on the horizon and excitement saturated the air. However, a bit of cockiness managed to mount an invasion as well. I had been to Europe before (one week in Paris, surely that made me a seasoned traveler!), and we were meeting a British friend, Diane, at the airport in London. She would negate the tourist scent we emitted! One small snag became apparent. My friend Jan was wearing a Green Bay Packers jersey, an obvious statement that we were Americans. She might as well have been wearing a big sandwich board announcing our nationality.

I imagined that England would be similar to the States, with a few minor exceptions: Brits would drive on the wrong side of the road (I soon learned to say other side of the road) and speak the Queen's English in a wonderfully refined accent. I soon discovered that my entry into British living would provide a much different view than the one I had observed from the American media.

We emerged from the London airport in a state of jetlag and found Diane anxiously awaiting us. Parched and dehydrated from the long journey, I desperately needed a drink. Of anything...water...juice...pop...I wasn't picky. I thought purchasing a drink would be

as easy as pulling out of O'Hare Airport in Chicago and stopping at one of the ubiquitous McDonald's or 7-11 stores. I was wrong; we really had to venture out of our way.

However, Diane was gracious enough to get herself lost in order to quench my thirst.

Once inside the store I encountered a fascinating environment of new and different products. Sure, the English had the old standbys like Coke, but they also had new and exciting beverages like Lucozade, Lilt, and Orangina. I bought a Lucozade (similar to Gatorade) and a Lilt (fruit flavored carbonated drink).

I quickly thrust out my 5-pound note and held out my hand for change. The clerk dropped five coins into my palm. I knew that the bill equaled a little less than \$10 so I waited for my bills. The clerk turned her attention to the next customer. In my fog-laden mind I thought, "Five coins...where are my bills? I'm being ripped off...probably because I'm a tourist!"

Just then the clerk at the counter saw my anguished face and asked, "Is everything alright?" Diane quickly came to the rescue. She responded that everything was fine. Her American friends were jet-lagged and had just arrived in England. Diane then explained to me that I held four 1-pound coins and one 10-pence piece. I had, after all, received the correct amount of change. The concept of a coin worth almost two American dollars utterly amazed me. I breathed a sigh of relief since I narrowly avoided starting an international incident within one hour of entering the country!

Our next task involved finding our way from London to the Manchester area where Diane lived. I expressed amusement that Diane would have any problems driving back

home. One just follows the maps and road signs in the U.S. I quickly discovered that concept was not as straightforward as it sounds in England.

British maps and signs are not marked with major cities and their directions as we experience in the United States. Driving through the countryside proves difficult even for residents. For example, we saw no signs marked Manchester - Northwest, or York - Northeast upon leaving London. Instead the signage system offered multiple choices when we came upon a roundabout.

We could choose between three towns: Little-Lamb-Upon-Pudding to the right, Crooked-Path-Under-Hastings straight ahead, or Steak-and-Kidney-Pie to the left. We then frantically searched the map while driving around and around the round-about (making other drivers angry - well, as angry as a polite Brit would get) trying to find the three towns on the map. After locating those communities, we then chose the one nearest our final destination and headed merrily in that direction. This challenging process repeated itself frequently throughout our entire trip.

We eventually found our way to Oxford and stopped for lunch. As we finished lunch, I unknowingly sent Diane into fits of embarrassment. Service had been terminally slow, and we were in a hurry, so I uttered the regrettable words, "Don't worry; I'll just get a doggie bag and take it with us." I eat very slowly and I thought that would be the best solution to get us moving and back on the road.

The look on her face along with an anguished "No!" quickly brought me to my senses. I learned that it is a major faux pas to request a doggy bag in England. I was

reduced to wrapping up the leftovers and tucking them away in my pocket to save the honor of Diane's name.

Those first five hours in Britain were quite eventful and marked the beginning of an incredible trip. This visit taught me not to think in an Ameri-centric way. Experiences and customs are different in various countries; even those that share a common language. The traveler needs to keep an open mind to understand and appreciate all that foreign countries and their people offer visitors. Even an ordinary activity like grocery shopping can suddenly erupt or casually evolve into an adventure/learning experience. One of the joys of travel is exploring and appreciating the differences and similarities that countries and cultures share. Go for it!