

A European Holiday 1976

The Letters of
DALE NIELSEN

SYNERGY PUBLISHING, MELBOURNE

Published by Synergy Publishing (Melbourne)
for MEMOIRS FOUNDATION (Australia)
2 Burwood Highway
Burwood East VIC 3151
AUSTRALIA

www.synergypublishing.com.au

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First published 2005

Printed in Australia by BOOKSURGE LLC

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Cover design: Mark Bonnet
Typeset in ITC Bookman Light 11 pt.

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Dedication

To Eliza-Jane and Erica

These are the letters your mother wrote home while she was travelling in Europe, which was some time before mobile phones rendered letter writing practically obsolete.

We hope you enjoy reading about your mother's travels, as much as the family did when the letters were first received.

Grandma and Grandpa

13 Platt's Lane
London N.W.3 7NP
8/12/76

Dear Mum, Dad, Mezz, Pete, hi Phill, Jye and anyone else who's interested.

London is divine, exactly as we expected – but first about the trip. We boarded about half an hour after we left you and left about 6.15am, an uneventful trip to Perth, except that we were able to sit in first class which was much roomier than economy – fell asleep until some jerk woke us up to tell us he was sorry to wake us but he had dropped his 15 cent biro down the seat and would we mind if he picked it up. If we hadn't just been woken from a deep sleep and had our wits about us he would have found out that we more than minded, we were furious!

Anyhow, at Perth more passengers boarded and we were back to economy, but this turned out to be good as we were sitting right next to the galley and the new crew (the stewards) were extremely good looking and friendly. We were soon chatting away and were looked after really well to Bombay.

We managed to get two Qantas pins each, a Qantas comb, matches, 60,000 refresher towels, and anything else we wanted, which included free wine, a trip around the galley, which took about 60 seconds as its about 4 foot square, and a trip to the flight deck. Jo was amazed by the switches etc.

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We got off at Bombay and very nearly died on the spot. 32 degrees and 100% humidity plus the petrol fumes, a half a mile bus trip to the terminal, which we were told might or might not be open. It was unfortunately! Imagine 400 people packed into the Bombay International airport, walking four flights of stairs up to find that Indians have never heard of air-conditioning in their weather! They had about four antiquated blade fans (wooden) on the ceilings. Tremendous! Never thought I'd be glad to get back on the plane, but I really ran up those steps. The air seemed so fresh and cool.

Next leg of the journey was the 10 hour flight to London, no stopovers. Fell asleep for about half an hour till the pilot told us all to look out the window – groaned – but glad I made the effort. We were over Turkey, and the snow covered mountains. Anyhow, it looked like Alaska might be, miles and miles of white-ridged mountains – sharp peaks covered in white icing. The rest of the journey dragged till we neared the English Channel and what Jo swore was Paris (on the sea), and I swore was Amsterdam, and which turned out to be Brussels.

Reckon I saw the White Cliffs of Dover, then London, miles and miles of lights, whole rivers of lights and dawn breaking in the sky, breathtaking! We got off the plane and rushed to Immigration to beat everyone else. Baggage took a while and I thought we would never get through Customs but just walked or dragged (too much luggage) through, and Rod was there to meet us.

Took a taxi from the airport to where we're staying. Taxis like American limousines only black and

shiny and no dents! Took us about an hour along the M4 motorway, first past factories and fields, and then past rows and rows of double storeyed, semi-detached houses (PS. Just saw a squirrel!)

It was a beautiful day about 8.00am, didn't even need a coat, but when we got out of the taxi, we nearly froze, an icy wind nearly cut us in two. Rapidly put on a coat and surveyed our new home, absolutely divine, so English! Rod's flat is on the third and top floor. To reach it, one goes down a path about two feet wide, with a hedge on one side (very difficult with bags in both hands), through a door and then up a spiral staircase which was about one foot wide. Three stories and ten years later two exhausted little bunnies dropped their bundles and fell to the floor. When sufficiently recovered to open their eyes they saw the perfect flats. Top floor looking down the hill over gardens and similar English houses, with stone paths and trees with a squirrel running along (night now), ravens etc. We have our own bedroom with bunks etc. Lovely! The kitchen and bathroom of equal size (three foot square) skylights, attic etc.

It's nearly 11.00 and I'm really tired but there's a clear pale washed out blue sky, which I'm told is rare, so it's a shame to waste such a lovely day! Going to look for a post office (Rod only moved in Monday so he doesn't know) and see if we can generate enough coinage to hop on a bus and get lost! Back later!

Well, back again! It's about 7.00pm now, just had dinner which Jo and I cooked. Turned out all right too. Just relaxing in the lunge room. From here you

can see the lights of London; it's a beautiful view in the daytime and the night time. We have been doing a fair few things today.

Walked Finchley Road, past little local shops and went to the bank and then to a little pub for lunch. Walking in you felt like you had gone back one hundred years. Men playing darts in the corner, crib at the tables and drinking huge glasses of Guinness and beer. I'm going to try a pork pie tomorrow.

Then we caught the subway to Trafalgar Square, through half the stations and names on the Monopoly board. When we saw all the pigeons we decided not to try to feed them. People who had bought seed were just covered in pigeons. We walked down Bond Street, then down Whitehall, past all the Houses of Parliament, saw Big Ben, where the horse guards change turns and then back down to Oxford Street, this is the main city shopping area that we have heard of anyhow. The shops are all old and quaint and surprisingly very cheap. Lovely shoes sell for about 15 pounds and boots about the same. Clothes are all reasonably inexpensive too. Decided we had to go and see the famous Marks and Spencers and were bitterly disappointed. Very similar to Coles in quality and set up, only on a much grander scale. We found the smaller shops much better.

We are probably going to Hampstead Heath tomorrow as it's only 10 minutes walk away. Have decided to move out of London a bit. Going to stay in Kent for a couple of days, probably in or near Cambridge, and then down to Cornwall, which is



Dale on Hampstead Heath - December 1976

Lorna Doone's country. Then across to Dover to 'allez' to Calais for a train to Paris and then on to Warsaw.

Thurs. Dec 8th

We've just got back from our day out. Another beautiful day, blue skies, very cold but nice cold, if you know what I mean. Hampstead Heath is lovely, about 800 acres of open unkept grass, trees all leafless now and paths leading to ponds that are half frozen and streams and bridges. It starts about two miles from where we live and so we walked via several little roads and the main Heath Road.

As I've said, the shops are unreal, bay fronted windows, super clothes etc. We browsed around an antique market and all the shops, then went and had a bowl of celery soup (aren't I good mum) and a roll, which cost about 45 pence or 50 cents. Meals here are very cheap, in fact it costs about

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the same to eat out as it does to cook food at home. Meat is incredibly dear, so even making things like spaghetti is not really economical. Later we went to have a cup of tea and a sit down in a tearoom. The atmosphere was so English; small wooden tables, white lace curtains. The tea was served on a tray in real silver teapots, and cream jug and the tea cups were flowery bone china. Unfortunately, no scones, but we made up with strawberry sponges.

It's only 5.30pm but pitch black outside. We were going to go to a disco tonight but Jo rang up a friend who's coming round about 9.00. We've got the flat to ourselves tonight as Rod's gone to Surrey. We'll be going down tomorrow to stay Friday night with some Aussie friends of his. Rod says there are millions of antique shops down there. Mum, you'd die if you could see all the incredibly cheap and wonderful antiques here.

Well, I think this is all that'll fit in the envelope so here's looking at you – Hope you're all well. Wish you were here.

Love to all

Dale

PS. Jo and I have decided to save up and come back next year and get a flat in London.

13a Platts Lane
London NW3
11/12/76

*D*ear Mum, Dad, Mezz, Pete, Li, Phill & Jye,

I hope this finds you all well, as it leaves me. While I think of it, don't lose my letters, as they'll probably serve as a substitute for a diary. I find it pointless trying to write down the same stuff twice, that's why I include everybody in the letters as it saves time and makes a decent letter rather than a few scribbled lines to each of you. If you find the writing hard to read I'm not surprised – hands are so cold I can hardly hold a pen. We got back today from Amay and couldn't relight the heaters so have only one strip heater. Needless to say the flat is 'ice'.

Well, since I wrote to you last we haven't stopped doing things. It's 2.00am really, the 12th, and this is the first chance I've had to get near a pen in the last two days.

Last Wed. night Melanie (who went around Aussie with Jo) & Alan arrived and we went to a pub in Hampstead for drinks. Old, tiny atmospheric, absolutely beautiful. They ring a little ship's bell for closing time. They came back to Platts Lane and stayed till about 1.00am so by the time we got to bed was nearly 2.00am. Up at 8.00am, down to the tube to catch a train to Farnham (Surrey). Changed at Waterloo Station, which is the most enormous

place about half the size of the MCG. English trains are a bit odd, because you have to sit at one end or the other of the train depending where you're going, as at certain junctions they break apart and go in opposite directions.

Anyhow got to Farnham and Rod wasn't there – rang the phone number he had given us and got 'Farnham Market' – beginning to panic when a huge Range Rover packed full of people and kids etc. stopped. Transpired that this was the family we were staying with. Squashed in, drove to car park and then wandered for a while round Farnham, which is an old country town, and then proceeded on a pub crawl, ending up in the Bush Inn which was another very old pub with fire in the grate, mellow wood and cider which is very cheap and only comes in half-pints or pints. Nothing so comforting as coming in from the cold streets and sitting down in warmth – a dog in front of the fire – drink in one hand and cigarette in the other. Pubs here are the focal point of social life. Dogs are allowed into them, as they are into most shops, even in central London. Just about anything goes.

Then we all drove to Spreakely Hollow where we were staying. This was the first real English countryside we'd seen. Drove through narrow (extremely narrow) winding lanes bordered by either old stone fences or Holly hedges, past lovely houses – big English manors or little cottages. Spreakely Hollow is what the English classify as rural middle class – almost a manor. Two stories – built in the 16th century with 17th century and 18th century additions. It's beautiful in every respect. You enter into a cobbled courtyard with ivy all around.



Spreakley Hollow, Surrey - December 1976

Inside, the ceilings are low, doorways even lower. There were so many rooms it was like a rabbit warren. After dumping our bags, we went out for a pub lunch at Tylford, which was about five miles away. Saw the second oldest cricket pitch in England – apparently no one knows where the first is. Had a Ploughman’s Lunch (or Mower’s Munch) which is another delightfully cheap English fare, consisting of a huge slab of soft french bread, a huge hunk of cheese, butter and the most divine pickle you ever tasted. If you can get Branston Pickle, get it!

Back to Spreakly Hollow, dinner a little later, and then time for bed. The room Jo and I had was out of this world. Huge, overlooking the meadows, leadlight windows and a huge double bed, with a white bed spread about 12 foot long but so cold. Jo was already asleep. As I went up, I quietly creaked the door open, it was like walking into a fridge your breath came out icy white. It was like getting

undressed on the front lawn in Melbourne in the middle of winter! Thought it had to be warmer in bed, so I jumped in and found out how wrong I was. It was like getting into soft layers of ice. Rather upset at this turn of affairs, I tried to steal Jo's hot water bottle but she wouldn't have a bar of that, so I silently froze, teeth chattering until I had thawed out the ice from sheer will, fell asleep until I woke up dying to go to the loo. So cold, I refrained till morning. By then I was lovely and warm. Dorothy brought in tea and pointed out that if we thought we were warm, there was solid ice inside the window.

Rambled around the lanes for about an hour. Went through Frensham where there is a 13th century church. Went inside for a while; at least it was heated. Caught the 2 o'clock train from Farnham – it took less than an hour for 50 miles. Then went straight to Portobello Road which is a famous street lined with antique stalls that are only open on Saturdays. Fabulous stuff but rather expensive.

We got home rather exhausted about 5.30pm. Rang Melanie who invited us to a party on the other side of London. We went, but only stayed a couple of hours and then all came back here – they've just left. Melanie is fabulous. Jo and I are staying at her and Alan's place tomorrow night and then Monday morning going up to Oxford where Alan works. He is an editor at Oxford Publishers and says that the centre of Oxford has remained the same for over four centuries. We will probably stay in Oxford overnight and then spend Tuesday in London and then, if Melanie can arrange it, stay at her father's house in the wilds of Wales. Anyhow I can't hold the pen any longer.

Love to all – wish you were here

Dale

PS. *Saw Buckingham palace tonight on the way home. Enormous place but I wouldn't want to live there. I can imagine how draughty it must be.*



The Changing of the Guards at Buckingham Palace

**1 Hangwellyn Cottage, Pantygoitre
Abergaveny, Cruent, Wales**

12/12/76

*D*ear Mum, Dad, Mezz, Pete, Li, Phill and Jye,

Well, how does this address strike you? In case you don't know where we are, we are staying in a cottage in deepest, darkest Wales, in the border country actually, about sixteen miles from Hereford. There are only four of us; Jo, Melanie and Melanie's father (who owns the cottage), and myself. We are rather secluded, except for the next door neighbours who are a Welsh couple we have yet to meet, who turn on their radio at 5.30 in the morning rather loud. When I say next door neighbours I mean virtually the same house, as it's similar to a semi-detached house.

We arrived here last night from Oxford, and so I think perhaps its best to tell you about there first. Oxford is almost completely a university town. I thought there would be one large Uni but actually it's comprised of about thirty or forty colleges, all separate. The town therefore centres around university life and is quite dead at this time of year because it's the winter term holidays. Unfortunately, we couldn't or weren't supposed to go into any of them, but we sneaked past the guard at Magdalen (pronounced Madlin) College, which is reputedly one of the most beautiful colleges there. The buildings are very old, probably 16th century or