

Driving in Great Britain



The WordchipperSM

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Watching the Royal Wedding on the “telly” last weekend reminded me of those blasted roundabouts. The Mrs. and I went to Great Britain back in the late 80s, armed with only a rental car reservation and a copy of *Fodor’s Guide* from the Fargo Public Library. Yup, I’m *that* frugal! We spent a week in London proper, seeing Westminster Abbey, the Tower of London, all the other tourist “musts,” and we even took the “Tube” out to Wimbledon to see Centre Court. Getting around the city of Charles Dickens and seeing an endless list of historical highlights was relatively easy by using public transportation. But then came time to leave the city and explore the rest of England and Scotland.

We rode the train back to Gatwick Airport, our portal of arrival in the U.K., where our rental chariot awaited. The lovely young lass in the office asked where we were going and I replied, “I don’t know” and requested a map, which I unfolded on the desk. Remembering what Chevy Chase did in one of his “family vacation” movies, I raised my index finger and, closing my eyes, I let a digit fall upon a location. Alas, it landed on Winchester, 68 miles southwest of London via the M-25 (“M” highways are usually four-lane jobs, similar to our Interstates).

In 1966, a group called “The New Vaudeville Band” recorded *Winchester Cathedral*, a song about the town’s famous church. This cathedral was depicted in the popular film *The Da Vinci Code*, starring Tom Hanks and based on the book by author Dan Brown. The church’s interior was used for a scene inside a London church. Jane Austen, who authored a number of classic novels including *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, is buried in the cathedral’s cemetery.

So, that’s where my finger landed on the map. We then went to the car along with the rental car lady. First mistake we made was getting in the wrong sides of the vehicle: I was to be the driver and reached for the left-side door and the Mrs. started to get in the front passenger seat, on the right. Oops! Our rent-a-car staffer inquired with classic British understatement: “Have you folks driven in Britain before?” No! We’re U.K. driving newbies and that’s why we forgot that these folks place the steering wheel on the opposite side from what we’re used to stateside.

After straightening out that *faux pas*, accompanied by nervous laughter from the Mrs. and me (the rental car lady *wasn’t* laughing, like Donald Trump *wasn’t* at the recent White House Correspondents’ Dinner), we then tried to find the highway to Winchester. This is when it hit home that I, as driver, while on the wrong side of the car, was now supposed to drive on the “wrong side” (left side) of the road. Ouch! The streets to exit the airport were all two-lane and I couldn’t wait to get to the four-lane “M” highway so at least I’d have two lanes going the same direction with no on-coming traffic. It would feel a bit like back home on I-29 or I-94. And it did, but getting out of the airport was a real OMG (Oh-My-God!) challenge.

It was dark by the time we arrived in Winchester and, giving up my four-lane comfort zone, I was back on city streets trying to find a bed and breakfast place at a “reasonable” rate. At that time, the dollar was worth about half the value of the British pound, but everything, including pizzas, were priced as they were back home: an £8 pizza became \$16 American. Another ouch! We found a place via the *Fodor’s* priced at around fifty pounds and we climbed the stairs to some sort of attic-type room. Turning on the telly, there were the Minnesota Vikings playing their Sunday afternoon game (England is about 6 hours ahead of Central Time stateside, as those of you who got up to watch the wedding well know).

Next morning, after the included English breakfast, complete a slice of *toe-MA-toe*, we headed out. But then, after I got used to driving on the “wrong side” of the road, hello roundabouts! I have difficulty enough with the increasing number of roundabouts in our country, but navigating these mazes while driving on the wrong side of the road and steering from the wrong side of the car is beyond challenging, it’s crazy! On top of that, I was grinding through the gears with a manual transmission and screeching the brakes as my wife screamed “LOOK OUT!”

All-in-all, I logged over 1,300 miles on that rental car before I turned it in at the Glasgow, Scotland, airport. Didn’t put a scratch on it but there were some tense moments. It’s doubly excruciating for the passenger. JoAnne and I are still married but—as with the driving—it was touch and go at times. I thought about that, as I watched William and Kate tooling around in their “just married” convertible.