

Lessons learned from England

Steve Smith, January, 2010

In early October of this year, I found myself in an English queue to order two pints of local ale. Maria and I were at the Masons Arms pub in the Lakes Region in northwest England. The scene was worthy of a timeless BBC television show – chilly evening, glowing fire, and dozens of patrons thoroughly enjoying themselves with a pint and an order of fish and chips or steak and ale pie.

The pub was loud with collegial chatter among a multi-generational clientele of locals and tourists. The warmth of the place was complemented by low beamed ceilings, rustic woodwork, a friendly bartender (from Nova Scotia) and a recent improvement – a smoke free atmosphere.

We had enjoyed this pub so much on Monday that we were back on Wednesday for dinner. We were in the midst of a two week whirlwind tour of the country and were trying to put a finger on why we enjoyed England so much. Given our ambitious itinerary of cathedrals, castles, museums, historic sites, country hikes and beautiful scenery (not to mention driving on the left and backwards around countless roundabouts), there had been little time to reflect upon our experience. But as we sat in the pub among the locals of Cartmell Fell, an overheard remark from a local patron helped crystallize our thoughts.

“I lived in America for two years” the man behind me said to his mate, “and this is what I missed the most.” Whether he was talking about the Masons Arms, the pub scene, or the whole country we will never know, but it hardly matters. What he was unmistakably referring to was the sense of community that we had seen and felt throughout the country during our fortnight there.

What was it that was seducing us? Was it simple fascination with a foreign country? Was it the fact that we were on vacation and away from the pressures of work? Did we have a subconscious bias about the place? Maybe, maybe and maybe. But there was no denying a basic fact - that we both sensed a greater sense of community during our fortnight there, in spite of the reserve that the British are so well known for.

In addition to the pubs, we had noticed it among the tweedy ladies chatting on High Street in Chipping Campden. We had seen it on the many public footpaths that cross private land. We had felt it among the school children taking their field trips to the very same sites we were visiting. In everyday settings and situations, the English just seemed to exhibit a tangible sense of community and belonging.

There is no mistaking where you are when you are in England, at least compared to the U.S. Everyone lives fairly compactly in cities, towns and villages that are surrounded by rolling countryside and farm and pasture land. There's not much in between. Unless you're a country squire, you live close to and among your neighbors. Most housing is

attached, clustered or on very compact lots. People do not have their private domains on one and two acres. They co-exist with their neighbors whether they like it or not.

When they want open space, they walk to the edge of town and hike on a public footpath that crosses private property. We never saw the word “trespassing” in England.

When they want to socialize, they “pop in” to the local pub or go to the “bring and buy” sale at the local community hall.

Over time, England has made choices that are different from the ones we’ve made in America. They have sacrificed privacy for community. They have chosen open countryside over large front and back yards. They have favored trains over cars. They have supported agriculture at the expense of converting that land to new development.

On our side of the pond, we have made our choices and encoded them in property laws, individual rights laws, and local zoning bylaws and ordinances that for the most part are designed to protect our privacy, self-sufficiency and individuality. But we seem to have an all or nothing mentality.

We should borrow some good ideas from the English. We need to permit some clustered development, allow mixed uses in our residential areas (pubs?), give a higher priority to transit projects, and save our farms. In short, we need to provide a little more for “us” at the expense of “me.” With small changes, we can have the best of both worlds.