



English Lessons: Chronicles from an Expatriate

By Elizabeth Whitmore, April/October Cycle '06

On the first afternoon in the English cottage, I walk around photographing the profuse flowers that are sprawling all over the hedges and tool shed. I feel like I am living in a Robert Kincaid painting. That night I take a walk past hayfields and try to avoid crushing the prolific snails and slugs that are underfoot. I keep hoping that I will turn a corner and see Heathcliff galloping toward me on a black horse, but the most exciting neighbors that I find are an old man in a cardigan sweater with a walking cane and a herd of Highland Cattle.

"I am going to have to get boring again," I write to a friend. "My excitement is going to come from perfecting the art of tea and understanding the poetic preferences of Ezra Pound." My illusions of dancing all night with a glass of London's Dry Gin in one hand and Orlando Bloom in the other have been blown all the way to Ireland.

England may be the capital of domesticity, but in some ways it is more barren than Texas, where it was easy to get cell phones, Internet connections, and more than ten channels on television. My brother is crestfallen over the fact that his only electronic possession is a water-proof radio that he found in our shower, which appears to have been made from a big tin can and a hose.

In the evenings, we sit and frown at the toaster-sized television's scratchy picture that gives news anchors and Tony Blair the skin tone of pumpkins. The television only shows a picture on cloud-free days (not that common in these parts), and if one jiggles its miscellaneous knobs and buttons just right you can occasionally get the reward of Irish channels. Sadly, this is a genuine source of amusement until the British television company comes to collect tax on the pathetic device, which is confiscated when we are unwilling to cough up 190 quid for such a pitiful excuse of technology. I watch the van drive away with the last electronic device that assures me that I am still living in at least the 20th century. Now I must forge ahead without the comforts of normalcy and rely on radio and newspaper. My life no longer operates in 2005, but in 1931.

When my brother unpacks and turns on his computer, it blows up with a flash of light and a puff of black smoke that smells of a bad packing job and American electricity. My mother's laptop screen turns red. Our cell phones die, suffocated to silence somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean. My laptop works, as does my mp3 player. I feel like the Chosen One. Modernity's blessing shines on me despite the perpetual rain clouds that coat my new horizon.

I walk fifteen minutes to a pay phone and call the States. I "book a session" to use the Internet at the local library, whose book count probably hovers at the same quantity as my own collection. I buy an ice cream cone that exceeds normal proportions from a young man who reminds me of Orlando Bloom, and then quickly check my pulse to be sure that I am not hallucinating. I visit Bath and, after moping around missing friends, buy myself a new purse and feel like I have acquired a new one with a Dorset accent.

Transcontinental shopping is a better antidepressant than American shopping because there is the cool advantage of being able to casually remark, "that scarf is from a shop behind Notre Dame" or "I bought those earrings in Cambridge." I make shopping lists that look like English stereotypes: big black umbrella, periwinkle cashmere sweater, rosebud teacup, and brown riding boots.



Green by Jay Graham, Montpelier Weekend '09

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Living in England is my opportunity to learn about Europe as a local. Daydreamers and those who lust after foreign exotica often overestimate the simple achievement of "soaking up local flavor." Of course I can *say* that I came to England for Oxford, Kensington gardens, afternoons on Cornish beaches, and the art of hedge trimming. The reality is that my England is a land of Bramley apple trees, gurgling car motors, bad television, poor water pressure, and wild ponies. This might be lovely if one has inherited a mansion in the region and is capable of settling down, planting a garden, canning blackberries and so forth, but in England I feel as homeless as the average Vietnam vet. My clothes, hundreds of dollars in pretty fabrics and lacey things, are randomly stacked amongst unorganized books and powerless American appliances. I live without placement. Several months ago when I thought about moving to England, I imagined a world bigger and better than my already-very-happy life in DC.

Now that I am in England, I imagine a life bigger and better off of the island, where I can casually recall the six months I spent living in the United Kingdom and therefore be able to remark and ridicule the strangely wonderful race known as the British. The cancellation of social activity and urban buzz in my life is a woeful loss, but I know that it is temporary, and it is a sacrifice I am willing to make in order to live abroad. Now I am able to stuff my Texas brain full of the sophistication of fado and Camembert and *pasta anchova* and Augustus Rodin and more cathedrals than even the most fervent Catholic can appreciate. *



Untitled by JK Reams, Virtual Vermont '08



Untitled by JK Reams, Virtual Vermont '08

Inexplicable

It was just a simple thing, but words cannot communicate the wonderful feeling

His tiny one year old hand grabbed mine and we walked together from one grandmother's house to another

How inexplicable to express to anyone the sensation created by this innocent touch between mother and son

And.....he did not pull away or tug at me with that precious hand

It was a wonderful grasp of confidence and I was overwhelmed

He was no longer a baby, yet still so young, and we could walk together side by side

Tears come to my eyes just thinking about that moment

No one would ever understand

Lucille M. Griswold, Virtual Vermont '07