

# England Scotland Wales Emails (08/09 to 09/29/2017)

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## Introduction

Our England, Scotland and Wales tour took us from London through most of England, into Wales and southern Scotland. We add a three day pre-tour and four day post tour to our trip. The pre-tour afforded us three extra days in London. The post tour took us to northern Scotland and the Scottish highlands.

During the trip we sent emails to our family every other day explaining our activities during the two days. The content of the emails is shown below, by day, in chronological order. Each day's activities are headed by the date along with our locations on that date. You can either read the entire set of emails or look at specific dates.

**August 10 – Arrive London:** Our visit has been very interesting and enjoyable! Yesterday we took the bus to see the changing of the guard. This was not the Buckingham Palace changing of the guard which is only done four times a week and impossible to get close to. This is done twice a day with horses and is very ceremonial. We then took the underground to Westminster area. The reason for taking both the bus and the underground was that we receive free transportation passes that can be used on both and the program director wanted to make sure we don't get lost after she leaves us. The Winchester area is where 10 Downing Street, Westminster Cathedral, Buckingham Palace and more are located. With my impossible ears, I wasn't sure what we were looking at. Also, with security over here now, we can't get close to a lot of things. At each of these places we walked and took pictures.

**August 11 – London:** It's been two days in London and so far we have seen a million people, ten thousand buses and an equal number of taxis. It is clear, the only way to get around London is by underground (subway) or walking. And have we been walking; 8 to 10 miles yesterday and something close again today. We shouldn't be gaining any weight. An interesting fact, the city of London, which is small, has 9,000 residents and ¾ of a million people work in the city. No wonder the traffic!

Today we set off for Hampton Court. I don't think it was very far away, but with London traffic it took forever both ways. Hampton Court was the home of Henry VIII (1509-1547), William III (1689-1702) and I'm sure others. From my standpoint, the building and rooms....court yards, apartments, kitchens, wine cellars, etc. were so-so. But, the gardens were absolutely beautiful. We left at 8:30 am and returned about 2:00 pm....two hours at the Hampton Court and the rest of the time getting there and back. Fortunately, the program director explained a lot to use during our trip each way. And it was easy for her, because we moved so slowly. Once back, we rested our feet for a few minutes and then it was off for lunch. Lunch was easy. We found a hot dog just outside the hotel. However, we didn't just settle for that. Yesterday we found a soft ice cream truck on the other side of the London Tower Bridge that was really, really good. So, over the bridge we went again. This is the London Tower Bridge that Meghan built out of Legos, so needless to say half of the pictures we have taken so far are of the London Tower Bridge from every angle imaginable. Today it was over the bridge for ice cream, up the other side of the river to the London Bridge (a different bridge than the London Tower Bridge) and back on our hotel side of the river. The London Tower Bridge, referred to as the Tower Bridge, is often mistaken as the London Bridge....but it is not. They are two different bridges.

One last thing about today....where do you think we had dinner. You guessed it, at a restaurant across the Tower Bridge from our hotel.

Don't tell Esther/Mom I told you this, but I had plenty of time to write this email. At 6:00 pm she was still sleeping! Also, for every picture I took Mom/Esther took at least three. Back at the hotel we spend

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hours sorting/deleting photos. At the rate we are going, we will have 15,000 photos or more by the end of the trip. And, you will have to look at all of them!

Our pre-trip group is comprised of fourteen people. Twenty two more will be joining us tomorrow for the regular trip. Our program director for the pre-trip, Kristen, left us this afternoon. David will join us tomorrow for the regular and post-trip. Our hotel is really nice, sits on the Thames River and is extremely well situated. That's why we are able to do so much walking. Although Mom/Esther would like the view from our room to have been the Tower Bridge, we have a nice second floor room overlooking a marina. Interestingly, there is a lock between the Thames River and the marina.

Also, things are fairly expensive here. The costs are about the same in sterling pounds as we pay in dollars, but the pound cost \$1.30 to \$1.40.

Tomorrow is a free day until 5:30 pm when we meet the additional people joining our group, so I think we will head back the Westminster area....probably taking underground one way and using our feet the other (in spite of the fact that the transportation isn't costing us anything).

I will attempt to write again soon.

**August 12 – London:** Today was an FREE day. We were completely on our own. I got up around 6:00 am and Mom/Esther slept in a little. We had a leisure breakfast (breakfasts are included) and headed off to Westminster again. A fairly long walk to the underground, onto the train and about six stations later we were there along with, as it seemed, everyone else in the world. Being a weekend it was really crowded.

From there we walked around taking photos of everything we could find and from every angle. This included Big Ben, Westminster Hall, House of Parliament, Westminster Abbey, Churchill Museum and Cabinet War Room, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Household Cavalry Museum, St. James Park and best of all Buckingham Palace. St. James Park covered a large area and it was a long walk through it to get to Buckingham Palace.

After visiting Buckingham Palace, it was back through St. James Park at which point we decide to walk over the Westminster Bridge. There are a lot of bridges crossing the Thames River. The Westminster Bridge is six bridges down from the Tower Bridge. On the other side of the bridge, I spotted a "McDonalds" and Esther/Mom spotted a "Subway". Guess where we ate. We made our way to the Subway along with everyone else on the bridge and eventually had a sandwich. After eating it was back across the bridge to the Westminster Underground Station. That's right! We pooped out, had sore feet and needless to say, we didn't walk back. We took the free underground to the Tower station and walked back to the hotel from there. All in all, it was about a 5 ½ hour day.

Tonight it was the get the information from the program director, meet and greet the new comers to our group, the ones that did not join the pre-trip, and have an included dinner. We met a few of the new comers and sat with a couple from Virginia. The [hors d'oeuvre](#) and dessert were great, but white chicken meat for me left something to be desired. All in all, the evening went well and we should have a pretty compatible group. We'll see!

**August 13 – London:** We are off for our first day of the regular tour. This morning it was up early, breakfast and off on the BIG bus with the now 36 in the group to tour London. In the bus with us was a local guide. Although we had seen, on our own, much of what we again saw today it was a worthwhile

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excursion. The tour guide was excellent and we did see many new things and learned a lot. I had mentioned London's traffic problem in my prior email. She elaborated on that this morning. She lives 4 miles from where she works. If she commutes by auto, it takes 1 1/3 hours to get to work. Also, once you get to London there is no place to park. Even if you find a parking place it costs 6 pounds (~\$7.80) per hour and then you are limited to two hours. According to her, it makes no sense to commute into London by auto. All reasonable people take the underground!

After leaving the local guide around 1:00 pm some of us headed off on foot for an additional tour with our program director. He took us to places we would never have gone to without being directed by a local. He stopped in a few restaurants and got us samples of the food for us to taste. During our walk we passed a mosque. We were invited in, had a question and answer with a member and even took photos with him. Interestingly, he was originally from Syria and has been in London eleven years. All of his family did not survive. Along the way, we would walk past underground stations. At each station the program director would direct those that did not want to continue on the walking tour how to get back to the hotel by underground. We passed two or three of these stations and a few peeled off from the group at each station. The remaining eight of us walked all the way back to the hotel. By the way, the weather today was outstanding. We even retook some pictures we had previously taken to get the blue sky in the background. So far, we have really lucked out with the weather. All in all it was a good day. We arrived back to the hotel tired and with sore feet. Guess who is currently sleeping!

Tonight it will be out to eat, after sleepy head wakes up that is, and then back early to bed....not before I get a creamy...if I can convince someone. Tomorrow we are off early on the BIG bus heading for our next location. Our first stop will be Oxford and Oxford University. That should be interesting!

We settled for a hot dog this evening, but I did get my creamy. Interestingly, the London Tower Bridge opened up to let a large ship through. First time we have seen that. Surprise...we took pictures.

**August 14 – Oxford to Cheltenham:** It was up early for breakfast and onto the bus to head out of London. It took a while to get through the London traffic, but once out of the area, the roads were fine. Initially a lot of flat land and the further away we got there were rolling hills and a lot of farm land. Our first stop was Oxford. Not a university environment, just a lot of individual colleges (38). Also the architecture was not what I expected from photos I have seen. Still it was impressive to see and walk around such a prestigious and old school.

Our next stop was not on our itinerary. We went off the beaten path for about a half hour. We finally stopped along the street and all got out. We walked up this narrow alley to a small church. There was a cemetery on a hillside leading up to the church and the grounds in the cemetery were a little shabby. There was nothing special about the church, except....there was a small burial plot up top near the church. The program director stopped at burial plot. Surprisingly, it was Winston Churchill! Apparently, he grew up in a well-to-do estate in the nearby town of Woodstock. His entire family is buried in this plot; wife, sons, etc. I can't imagine there are many visitors to the cemetery, but there is a Winston Churchill museum in Westminster.

Our next stop was to Bourdon on the Water. Not impressive, with novelty stores, restaurants and tea parlors on two roads with a river/stream running between them. Not my cup of tea. From there it was on to our hotel in Cheltenham with an included dinner; the second included dinner with white chicken meat.

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**August 15 – Bath & Stonehedge:** We were up and out early for a long day on the bus to two historical sites and a pub for dinner. First, my observation after traveling in eastern England is that the roads are narrow, instead of traffic lights they have a circle at every intersection which slows traffic, all roads look like back roads in the USA and they have fairly high vegetation growing along the sides of the road so you can't see very much. The area is hillier than I would have guessed and the biggest surprise is the amount of farm land. They grow hay all over the place; miles and miles of it. I don't know what they do with it because I don't see very many animal farms.

Well, the first long bus ride took us to Bath, a village that contains ancient Roman baths. The temple was constructed in 60-70 AD and the bathing complex was gradually built up over the next 300 years.

The second stretch on the bus took us to Stonehedge, a site that dates back to as early as 3000BC. Today, the interpretation of Stonehenge which is most generally accepted is that of a prehistoric temple aligned with the movements of the sun.

The third leg of our bus trip for the day took us to a pub for dinner. Harrah....not white chicken meat! They offered us free beer or soft drink (no beer for me...doctors orders), served Sheppard's Pie (actually it was Cottage Pie which was very good) and an outstanding dessert. Following dinner, it was a short ride back to our motel...the same motel as last night.

**August 16 – Caernarfon, Wales:** We are on our way to Wales with stops along the way. During this drive, which was a long one, we drove from fields of hay or some kind of grain, rolling hills and not being able to see what was behind the trees or hedge rows that bordered the road in England to pastures of sheep, mountains, and much more scenic views of the area we were driving through as we entered Wales. England must not want people to know what is alongside their highways. One thing England and Wales have in common is their narrow and windy roads.

Our first stop, which was not a scheduled stop, was at Anglo Welsh. It is the first canal that spanned a ravine/river that was made of steel. Over the ravine the water was about four feet deep. It is now a tourist attraction with, for a fee, boat rides up and down the canal.

Our second stop was only for an hour at a small, quaint village, "LLangollen", where we had lunch (and of course ice cream) and just enough time to use the toilets. It was a pretty village with a rapid river running through it. More photos!

Our last stop was Caernarfon in Wales where we will be spending the next two nights. The trip to Caernarfon took us over a very rocky mountain which is a Wales National Park (I'm not sure that is what they call it). And yes, there were sheep all over the mountain slopes. About 3:00 pm in started to misty rain. This was the first rain we have had since our first day in London. After checking into our rooms, we went on a misty rainy walking tour of the village with our program director. It is a small area and the mist was so fine we really didn't get wet.

After going back to the hotel we had a little time to unpack and refresh. At 6:00 pm we all met and were taxied to six different homes for home hosted dinners. This is always one of the highlights of the GCT trips. This one was no exception! There were six of us that went to John and Mo's home. They were a great couple that served us an assortment of drinks in their third floor sitting room overlooking the Dee River followed by dinner downstairs in their dining room. We had a great meal, discussed all kinds of subject and felt like family by the time we left at 9:00 pm. We even got hugs as we were leaving. Prior to

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dinner they gave each of us a menu of the meal they were serving written in English and Welsh. After dinner they gave the four women Welsh recipe books. Of the five home hosted event we have attended over the years, this ranks at or very near the top. Great people....great time!

We are now back at our hotel. Esther/Mom went to bed and I am working on keeping these emails up to date.

**August 17 – Activities around Wales:** We are off on an optional tour (that means we paid extra) up the mountains to an old slate mine on a narrow gauge railroad, to a village for lunch and to a visit at the slate museum. We left punctually at 8:45 am this morning on a very dreary, hazy, rainy morning. Fortunately, the weather for the day didn't turn out too bad. We had virtually no rain and actually so the sun at times.

It was back into the mountains. Our first stop was for a ride on the Ffestinlog Railway. This is a steam engine train ride on narrow gauge rails that was used to carry slate down the mountain back in the 1800's. Since the late 1800's, after the slate business disappeared, the railroad has been used for tourism. The train traveled from the coast up into the mountains and took about 1 ¼ hours.

After the train ride and another short bus ride we stopped in Portmeirion for lunch. Portmeirion is a resort village sitting on the slope of a mountain overlooking the river. It is beautifully done and needless to say we took our share of photos. This was not a good day for Esther/Mom. Sinus or something was making her not feel too good.

Following lunch we headed to the Slate Museum where we saw a short movie on the mining and production of slate followed by a slate splitting demonstration. The demonstration was very interesting. We then spent the balance of our time looking around the museum and using the toilets.

As for countryside beauty, so far, Wales has it all over England.

From there it was back to the hotel. Esther/Mom, still not up to par, is currently resting. When she wakes up, we will decide whether we go out to dinner or just I go out and get something to eat.

Tomorrow we are back in England visiting Chester and spending the next three nights in York.

**August 18 – Chester & York:** It is 8:15 am we were on our way back into England. Today was a long driving day from Caenarfon in Wales to York in England with a short stop in Chester, England. During this trip the scenery changed again. Very few hayfields or pastures full of sheep. The areas we traveled through were more residential and industrial. There were open spaces and the terrain was hilly, but not mountains like in Wales. We did travel through some rain, but like other days, the rain occurred at times when it did not affect our outside plans.

Chester, like the other villages/cities we visited had a large Roman presence. Our stop in Chester encompassed a short walking tour by our program director along with time to have lunch on our own and walk around some. In addition to the village, we saw Roman walls (it's getting to the point that once you have seen a Roman wall, you've seen a Roman wall) which we were able to walk across, a Roman Amphitheater and more. I could have spent more time in Chester. It was lovely.

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From Chester it was on to York with a short stop for a pee and coffee break. We arrived in Chester in the late afternoon, checked in, got our bags to our rooms and headed out on a walking tour with our program director. Esther/Mom was still not feeling up to par, so she skipped the walking tour. At 7:00 pm it was time for dinner in the hotel on GCT. We both went down to dinner, but after the looking at and smelling the food put in front of her, Esther/Mom decided it best to head back to the room and skip the dinner.

From dinner it was back to the room for hopefully a good night's sleep. Talking about the room....this was the worst hotel we have stayed in. Our room was so small, with no closet, no safe, and no place to put anything. When talking with our other travelers, they all commented about the room size and no closet. I said to them, "We have a closet, our beds are in it".

**August 19 – York:** We started the day with breakfast in the hotel and then out for a walking tour with our program director. It was not only the hotel room that wasn't the greatest. The breakfast was the worst we have had as well. Wouldn't you know we are here for three nights? Unfortunately, it was a day without Esther/Mom. Again she wasn't up to par this morning and decided to spend the day in the room/bed to see if she could finally beat this bug or whatever it is.

During the tour we stopped at the York Minster (this is a cathedral) where we had a local guide. We spent about two hours getting the history of the cathedral which burned three times in the last 200 years and was reconstructed. The guide was outstanding and a lot was learned. Unfortunately, much more was learned than will be remembered.

Following the tour I left the group and attempted to work my way back to the hotel. Although not a large distance, even with a map, I struggled to get back. Once back, I spend some time with Esther/Mom and then went out for my own walk to get some lunch...and of course, some ice cream. This time I was more careful where I was going and had little trouble getting around and back to the hotel.

Dinner tonight is still up for grabs. There is no food service at the hotel on weekends, so we have to go out. I don't know whether it will be just me or both of us. We'll see!

Well, it is now after dinner and Esther/Mom did go out with me. She didn't eat very much, but we'll see how it settles.

**August 20 – York:** We have a free day! The group is off on an optional tour. We neither felt up to it nor thought we would really enjoy, so we decided to opt out of this one. We did take advantage of no commitment this morning by sleeping in. It was after 9:00 am before we headed down for breakfast.

Following breakfast we went for a walk to the York Minster Cathedral since Esther/Mom hadn't been to the cathedral and since neither of us saw the museums in the basement. However, being a Sunday and due to services, tourist were not allowed in until 12:45 pm. We had 1 ½ hours to wait. We walked around York taking photos and worked our way back at 12:45 pm. Fortunately, since the GCT group had been there the prior day; we were able to get in for free. I did my best to relay to Esther/Mom what I learned from the guide yesterday. All in all, we enjoyed the cathedral and the walk.

Our next stop was for a light lunch. We found a place serving French onion soup where we could sit outside. BTW...it was a beautiful day again today. After lunch we walked back to our hotel. Since Esther/Mom is still not completely back to feeling herself, she is currently resting.

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It was out again for us about 6:00 pm for dinner. We found a restaurant that served Italian food. Mom, still taking it easy, had a salad. I had a very good pasta dish. Following dinner we walked back to the hotel. Tomorrow is a moving day. It will be up and out early. It looks like a really fun itinerary, but not a good weather forecast; we'll see!

**August 21 – York:** We are off to the lake section, northwest, of England. The area borders on the Irish Sea. On a clear day if we could see far enough, we would be able to see Ireland. The weather forecast for the area we were headed was tropical rains, 10 mm (~0.12 inches). I'm pleased to say we had no rain, of course no sun either, until we checked into the hotel for the night. Lucked out with the weather again!

As we headed out of York, the terrain looked a lot like what we have seen before. There were some hay/grain fields and some sheep pastures. The farther west we went it became more and more sheep pastures. I don't know what the English do with all the sheep. We were also back to the English trick of hiding what was alongside the roads.

Our first stop of the day was the village of Settle. We walked around the village, we saw the oldest musical theater in Europe and found a place for coffee and something sweet. They were for me. Esther/Mom didn't have anything.

Next it was on to a farm visit....the highlight of the day, if not the trip. Roger and his Kathleen along with their son Sam look after some 130 milking cows and hundreds of sheep on some 400 acres. The farm is located near the Lake District National Park in Yorkshire, England. They have two border collies that are experts in rounding up the sheep. These dogs are absolutely amazing. I could have watched them all day. They obey, to the tee, every command the farm makes. According to the farmer, the sheep think the dog is a wolf and react accordingly.

From there it was to the cows and milking operation. Roger and his family work long hours everyday...up at 5am...milking the cows 10-11 at a time ...collecting some 1,500 liters of milk every day which is 350-400 gallons and gets about 35-38 pence per liter. To make a long story short, the milk producing business has become extremely scientific. What these farmers have to go through and the risk they take to produce milk is unreal. Both the milk and the sheep pay the bills but the cows are the best. We actually had lunch in the upstairs of one of the barns. They had box lunches and we sat on bales of hay. During lunch I took advantage of having a one-on-one discussion with the farmer. I got some answers and learned a few things....

- What happened to all the hay I saw being produced in southern England where there didn't appear to be many animals? ANSW: Not many animals are raised in the south. The hay produced is shipped to the north.
- From our Ireland trip...the sheep had colored dots sprayed on their backs to identify the farm and many farms grazed their sheep together. Since dogs are color blind, how are they able to round up the sheep? ANSW: The breeds of sheep they raise tend to stick to an area and stick together. Thus when the dogs bring them back to the farmer they are mostly the farmer's sheep. All the farmers round up their sheep at the same time and sort the few that are mixed in.
- The sheep are raised for lamb. Wool lost its value in England years ago to synthetic materials that do shrink, hard wood or inlaid so no rugs, etc.
- A sheep is a lamb until about 9 months. Actually, they can be a little older and can actually have one off-spring...but not two.
- They artificially inseminate the cows with thawed frozen sperm.

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- AND, there is much more.

From the farm it was off to our hotel with one more stop in the village where William Wordsworth “poet” is buried. We walked around the village, visited the cemetery, managed to find an ice cream cone and headed back to the bus.

From there it was to our hotel for just tonight. The hotel is very remote, nothing around it, but very nice. We had dinner at the hotel, after which I spent some time on this email and then off to bed early.

**August 22 – Edinburgh:** It was travel to Edinburgh, Scotland day. After traveling through England, Wales and now the southern part of Scotland, the countries all have three things in common....an abundance of sheep, an abundance of rock and narrow windy roads with circles at almost every intersection. I haven't mentioned the rock before, but between the walls and other structures the Roman built a 1,000 plus years ago and the walls built to clear the fields to grow hay/grain and make pasture land for the sheep and cows, there are rocks galore.

This morning after breakfast we headed out on our bus traveling toward Scotland. We made one stop before getting to Scotland at Hadrian's Wall. You guessed it, another Roman wall built a million (or so) years ago. We were there long enough to look around and take photos.

Back on the bus and we were continuing our trip toward Scotland. At a point the bus driver (his name is Vince and he is from Edinburgh) pulls over to the side of the road and we all pile out of the bus. What do you think was just behind us; you got it, a “Welcome to Scotland” sign. We made a real production out of this. A billion photos, including one of Esther/Mom and me holding an English and Scottish flag next to the sign, and we were back on our way.

On a more somber note....on the way to our lunch stop we drove through Lockerbie, Scotland. I don't know whether you remember, but in 1988 Pan Am Flight 103 from London to New York exploded in midair over Lockerbie, Scotland, an hour after departure. A bomb that had been hidden inside an audio cassette player detonated inside the cargo area when the plane was at an altitude of 31,000 feet. All 259 passengers, including 35 Syracuse University students returning home for the holidays, were killed in the explosion. In addition, 11 residents of Lockerbie were killed in the shower of airplane parts that unexpectedly fell from the sky. A very sad reminder!

Our next stop was at a hotel for lunch in Moffat, Scotland. We had a short time to walk around the town, take few more photos, look in the stores and have our lunch. It was a good lunch. After everyone had finished eating, back on the road we were again.

Over the next hour we took a lot of photos from the bus. The Scotland scenery was different and interesting. At a point along the way we stopped at a lookout. Not only was it beautiful, but the program director gave everyone a small (taste) drink. I had very little Scotch. I'm not a scotch fan, but it wasn't bad.

Finally we arrive in Edinburgh. We are here for three nights so I would say much about today. We'll see how the next couple of days go.

**August 23 – Edinburgh:** It was off first thing for a short walking tour of Edinburgh with a local guide. It was the first time since the first day we arrived in London that we used our umbrellas. It was just a

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drizzle, not even a real rain. At 10:00 am we met our bus to extend the walking tour into a bus tour of the city. By the time we got on the bus, the rain had stopped for the day.

The bus tour took us around the city culminating at the Edinburgh Castle. To me, castles pretty much are all built the same way; large stone, cold inside and as high up as possible to make it hard for enemies to attack. Edinburgh castle was no exception. However, the location of the castle made it outstanding. It sits very high on a rocky cliff that has virtually vertical sides on three sides. The only side the castle can be accessed from is at the entrance. It would have been very difficult to attack this castle.

Following our guided and self guided tour of the castle we walked down the "Royal Mile" and back to our hotel. The Royal Mile is what they call the road leading down from the castle. Unfortunately, there was a restaurant fire, so we got diverted down a hill and up another one. After unloading some of our stuff (we carry too much with us, particularly rain gear which we fortunately haven't had to use) we decided to walk down to New Town. The Scots decided to build New Town because the Old Town was getting too run down. New Town was built 250 years ago. From New Town we had good views of the Edinburgh Castle. Unfortunately, the good views were looking into the sun. So, it was hard to get good photos. We found a garden path below the sidewalk which we returned on. It was very nice and in the shade. We even sat for a while and enjoyed the view and weather.

Every August, for the month, Edinburgh has an art festival referred to as the Fringe. Needless to say, the streets everywhere are crowded. Anyway, this evening we went to an early "Fringe" show called "Education, Education, Education". It was a political satire on education over the last twenty years. For those that could hear it, it was very enjoyable and funny. I also enjoyed it, but wasn't able to pick up everything...missed some of the funny parts.

After the show we found a place for dinner, walked some more on the Royal Mile and then back to the hotel for an early night. It's not hard getting to sleep after our days activities.

**August 24 – Edinburgh:** Another beautiful weather day. Boy, have we been lucky! Just as a point of interest....petro "Fuel" prices in England, Scotland and Wales have ranged from £1.14 to £1.30 per liter. That equates to \$5.50 to \$6.39 per gallon.

This morning we were off on an optional tour. In case you don't remember, that's the kind of tour we pay extra for. Today it was to the Royal Yacht Britannia and then to the Holyrood Palace. Guess which one I liked better?

The Royal Yacht Britannia maiden voyage was in 1954 and it was decommissioned in 1997. During her career as Royal Yacht, *Britannia* conveyed the Queen, other members of the Royal Family and various dignitaries on 696 foreign visits and 272 visits in British waters. In this time, *Britannia* steamed 1,087,623 nautical miles. If you are interested in learning more, check out [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMY\\_Britannia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMY_Britannia). The tour was well done with headset explaining every section of the ship; even the engine room. You wouldn't believe how clean the engine room was. You could eat off the floors or anything else in there. Due to the recession in the late 1990's, the royal family had to forgo getting a new ship. They are currently without one. Really tough on them, don't you think?

Holyrood (definition: the cross on which Jesus died) is the official residence of the British monarch in Scotland, Queen Elizabeth II. Located at the bottom of the Royal Mile in Edinburgh, at the opposite end to Edinburgh Castle, Holyrood Palace has served as the principal residence of the Kings and

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Queens of Scots since the 16th century, and is a setting for state occasions and official entertaining. Again if you are interested in learning more, check out [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holyrood\\_Palace](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holyrood_Palace) . Two things, photos were not allowed inside and the gardens were beautiful.

From the palace we walked back on, you guessed it, the Royal Mile (only from the other end) to the hotel. We decided (actually, I decided) that lunch should be a pastry and coffee. Next to our hotel was the "Patisserie Valerie" with all kinds of goodies in the window. We have been walking past it for two days and have managed to not go in. Well, today was different. We went in and bought pastry and coffee (Esther/Mom made hot chocolate in the room) and brought it back to our room (it cost almost twice as much to eat it in as take it out). We pulled the chairs in our room near to the window and enjoyed our pastry and drink.

Tonight is our farewell dinner. The group members not going on the northern Scotland extension will be departing for home tomorrow. We will be left with 23 of the 34 that were in the main group. We had a nice dinner with a Scottish bagpipe player as entertainment before dinner. It was like family or good friends leaving a gathering; everyone was saying goodbye and hugging each other. You would think we all knew each other forever. I don't know whether we will do that again when the rest of us head home in a few days. Maybe!

**August 25 – St. Andrews to Inverness:** The 23 of us are back on the bus with Vince, the driver, heading for Inverness. We will be there for three nights touring northern Scotland and then on to Glasgow for our last night before flying home. We left our regular traveling time, about 8:30 am and headed out of Edinburgh. The country side changed as we went. There were not nearly as many animals, sheep or cows, pasturing. There was still a lot of farm land but in addition to hay/grain we were now seeing a lot of vegetable farms. The soil was different, dark brown and looking like it should grow something.

Our first stop was a surprise. We stopped at St. Andrews and had the choice of spending two hours at the golf club or sending some of the time in the town of St. Andrews. I wasn't about to be at St. Andrews and not spend the time at the golf club. We passed on going into the town. We were dropped off at the 1<sup>st</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> holes (1<sup>st</sup> going away from the club house & 18<sup>th</sup> coming back to the club house) of the "Old Course". The Old Course at St Andrews is one of the oldest golf courses in the world, a public course over common land in St Andrews, Fife, Scotland. The Old Course at St Andrews is considered by many to be the "home of golf" because the sport was first played on the Links at St Andrews in the early 15th century. The British Open, "The Open", has been played there 29 times, the last time in 2010. It is scheduled to be played there again in 2018.

From St Andrews, it was on the road again heading toward Inverness. During the last few minutes at St. Andrews it started to drizzle. The further north we went the more the drizzle turned into rain. We drove into the highlands, up over a mountain, into a valley, up the valley for a number of miles and then over the other side of the mountain. It probably was very beautiful. Unfortunately, as the rain got heavier it wet the bus windows and it was hard to see out and no longer possible to take photos out of the bus. We finally arrived at our hotel in Inverness. Since dinner was on our own, after checking in we walked about ten minutes in the rain with umbrellas to a pub. One of the single men on our tour was already at the pub. We joined him and had a quite good meal. Umbrellas in hand, we headed back to the hotel after dinner and called it a night.

**August 26 – Inverness:** We woke up to horrible weather. It was raining, cloudy, foggy....just plain ugly! It was unfortunate because we were heading out on the bus for a site seeing trip to the Isle of Skye which was about 80+ miles south west of Inverness. So be it, our weather has exceeded expectation for the

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trip until now. So, following breakfast it was on to the bus and off we go with umbrella and rain gear. Windows again so wet you could hardly see out and certainly not able to take any photos.

The first site we passed was Loch Ness. Loch is the Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Scots word for a lake or for a sea inlet. We were heading southwest, and interestingly, the further we went the clearer it started to become. Absolutely amazing and surprising, we wound up with the clearest day we have had on our entire trip. It was a relatively warm day and at times not a cloud in the sky. We were able to take some of our best photos on our trip with perfectly blue sky. Who would have believed!

After a few toilet stops we finally made it to Isle of Skye. The scenery along the way was outstanding. The land was barren, mountains and a lot of water. After spending some time at our destination looking around and having our lunch we started back. For the most part, the return trip was it was backtracking. It was good; different direction, different sun position, etc. An interesting point....we complained we couldn't take photos out of the bus when the windows were wet, well, with the bright sun everything reflected off the windows and it was hard to get a photo without getting the reflection. Just can't win!

On the way back we made a stop at Eilan Donan Castle. It sat out in the water on a rock ledge. The cost to visit was 6.5 pounds and we were only going to be there for a short time, so we used the toilets, got an ice cream and walked around and took photos.

From the castle it was back on the bus with 1 ½ hours to our hotel. As we did going out, we passed Loch Ness. Loch Ness is a large, deep, freshwater loch in the Scottish Highlands extending for approximately 37 kilometres (23 miles) southwest of Inverness. Its surface is 16 metres (52 feet) above sea level. Loch Ness is best known for alleged sightings of the cryptozoological Loch Ness Monster, also known affectionately as "Nessie". As hard as we tried, we were unable to spot Nessie!

After arriving back at our hotel, I dealt with our photos of the day, updated the emails and we rested a little. At 7:00 pm it was to the hotel restaurant for a GCT dinner. Following dinner it was to our room for a little more work on the emails and early to bed.

Tomorrow the group is going on an optional trip to see more castles. We decided not to join them and plan to explore Inverness.

**August 27 – Inverness:** It was a day for relaxing. Most of our group went on an optional bus tour to a castle and museum. We felt we had seen enough castles and decided to stay around the hotel. We got up late and had our breakfast. After breakfast we walked down to the city which was about a 20 minute walk. We strolled through the city and up and down both sides of the River Ness. The river was interesting. The current was swift, but the river was very shallow. You could see the bottom from the middle of the bridge. The bridges weren't high enough to have any reasonable size boat go under. On both sides of the main bridge across the river there were walking bridges. They were about ½ mile apart. We walked over one bridge down the other side of the river to the other bridge and back across the river. The weather cooperated and it was a nice day.

As with any city in Europe, it has a castle. We walked up to the castle. Because of the height, the views were great. Needless to say, our cameras went into action again. We did not go in. After we had had enough walking, we found a place to have an early dinner. It was a nice spot along the river, but it ended there. We had the worst meal we have had on our entire trip. Not only that, but they tried to stick us for an extra 6 pounds.

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Since we had eaten dinner early, we decided tonight to go down to the bar to have something light. We settled for a glass of wine, Esther/Mom had a bowl of soup and we split a sandwich. We are now back in our room waiting for housekeeping to bring us some cream so we can have a decaffeinated coffee/tea in our room. It will then be an early night.

Tomorrow we leave at 8:00 am for Glasgow our last stop. The next day it is to the airport and flights home.

**August 28 – Glasgow:** The last day of our trip....except for flying home tomorrow.

Well, the weather finally caught up with us. It was raining when we got up this morning and it continued to rain, on and off, for the balance of the day. We really can't complain; we beat the weather odds. The month before we got here it rained continuously. We really only had two days where the weather interfered with our activities, the first and last.

We left this morning at our regular time, too early as far as Esther/Mom is concerned, and headed for our last destination....Glasgow. We again drove past Loch Ness and again we couldn't spot "Nessie". Of course it was raining and harder to see out of the bus. Most of the trip was through mountains and Loch's. Remember, Loch is the Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Scots word for a lake or for a sea inlet. There were many streams and waterfalls coming off of the mountains and flowing into the Lochs. On a sunny day they would have been beautiful.

We did stop a number of times for toilet breaks, coffee, site seeing spots and lunch. The site seeing spots were difficult because of the weather. We arrived in Glasgow about 4:00 pm and said good bye to our bus driver, Vince, who had been with us since London. After checking into our room, we took a short walking tour of Glasgow with our program director. At 6:30pm we had our last group dinner (at GCT expense) and said our final good byes....sort of. All of the NC people, 20 including us, will be on the same plane to Philadelphia. We will see them all in the morning at breakfast, on the shuttle to the airport and on the plane.

That's it!

### **In summary....**

My opinion of the country sides has Scotland first, followed by Wales and then England. I never expected so much open land in all three countries, most of which is used for growing hay/grain, pasturing sheep (millions of them) and cows and treeless and rocky mountains. Except for the Interstates, the roads are narrow and windy and there are just too many circles. In the cities and in places in the countryside many of the structures are old, really old....as much as 2,000 years and more. We finally found places abundantly selling wool products in Scotland; scarves, blankets, kilts, ties, you name it. I knew the wool from all those sheep had to go someplace. With the number of sheep in all three countries, we found very few restaurants that sold lamb. Like most of Europe, there are too many castles, cathedrals, palaces, etc....at least for me to see.

All in all, it was a good trip; a good group, a good program director and interesting countries.