Tom Marshall's Weekly News, February 2, 2009

England in the Mid-20th Century: My first trips to the British Isles were as a travel agent in 1951 and 1952. Air travel was coming on strong, and the various transatlantic carriers were ever anxious to promote their individual airlines. In the off-season (most any time except June, July, and August), travel agents were given free trips as a part of this promotion.

In September 1951, I had been lining up American Quakers who wanted to attend the 1952 Friends World Conference in Oxford, England. I flew to Britain to make on-site arrangements there on British Overseas Airways, then flying "Strato-cruisers," modified B-29 bombers of World War II vintage. The fuselage had an underbelly attached with a spiral stairway accessing a 17-seat cocktail lounge on the lower level. All passengers traveled first class, as "tourist" class had not been introduced. The regular fare from New York to London was $350 one-way or $630 round-trip (much more than by steamship). Mine was a very comfortable flight, but the 200 M.P.H. air speed, and the limited range made stops necessary. Flying out of Idlewild Airport on Long Island (later JFK), we stopped in Boston, where they fed us a deluxe dinner at the airport and then at Prestwick, southwest of Glasgow, Scotland, where we had a full breakfast, before flying the final leg to London. Returning, I left from Prestwick, we stopped at Keflavik Airport in Iceland, saw the coast of Greenland, then up the St. Lawrence Valley to Montreal, almost keeping up with the sun, before we turned south to New York.

It had been six years since V-E Day ended World War II in Europe, but Clement Attlee's Labor Government, which had deposed Winston Churchill at the polls in 1945, had done little to bring Britain out of the privations suffered during the war. Meat was very scarce, and it was hard to get a good meal in a restaurant. Things were very cheap, however, especially when using American dollars. A well-known chain called Lyons Corner Houses (cafeterias) provided nice selections of salads, sandwiches and desserts for 49 cents. I stayed at a small inn in the northwest of England where dinner, bed (no private bath), and breakfast cost $1.75. The *Festival of Britain* was being celebrated in that summer of 1951, with a small world's fair on the south bank of the Thames in London and "Illuminations" in all towns and cities to celebrate not having wartime black-outs any more. Soft coal smoke was in the air, and steam trains ran everywhere. Some of my time was spent in the many London Railway stations, and I had a great four-hour ride on the former London & Northeastern Railway from York to Edinburgh behind a shining Pacific locomotive, visible from the rear of the train as we rounded the many curves along the North Sea coast at 60 M.P.H. I had introductions to a number of British Quakers and rode a four-wheel double-decker trolley car all over Edinburgh with a front seat on the upper level.

I returned in 1952 when all "my people" were there, flying on Sabena, the Belgian Airline, via Brussels to and from London. Most of the American Quakers, and there were 305 who booked with us, traveled by tourist class on one of the transatlantic ships, about $175 per person one-way, for the crossing that took between five and eight days. Frames' Travel Service in London handled European arrangements for us, and my main contact there, Peter Honey, was very proud of his bicycle, but he had only a permit and couldn't pass the test to get his license.

Most of the Americans spent time in London before the Oxford conference, and many took trips before and after around the British Isles and on the Continent. I had a temporary office in the Cora Hotel in London and in the Randolph at Oxford (the story of hiding cash in the Grand Piano and above the fireplace was told in the Weekly News of 6/26/06). Between my '51 and '52 visits, 10 months apart, Churchill had become Prime Minister again, and King George VI had died, beginning the reign of Queen Elizabeth II, now entering its 58th year.