

London Calling – A Weekend Diary

Saturday 18th June 2005

Zoë and Emily knew they were going to London and that they were staying in a hotel. That was it. They didn't know where the hotel was, and why should they care? It was in London. And they didn't know what they would be doing -they would be seeing London, I suppose.

The day started off with Zoë having a nosebleed, but she coped without any complaint. "It'll be all right Dad, it's not a bad one".

The Train

We caught the train at 10:20 and had a table, almost a carriage, to ourselves. One of the new carriages - smooth, quiet and, most importantly, air-conditioned. Temperatures this weekend were going to reach 33c. First off, it was great to just relax. There was no agenda as far as they were concerned, and I could forget all the stuff I had booked for them.



Well, I thought I would entertain Emily by letting her listen to some songs from "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang" on my iPod. She had loved the DVD when we had rented it two weeks ago, so I had downloaded some of the songs including her favourites, "You Two" and "Toot Sweets", the lyrics of which I had printed. As she sang along, pointing at Zoë and me ("I Have You Two") I told myself the rest of the carriage would be enjoying it and there was no need to ask her to lower the volume. She was so happy. Later, she and Zoë entertained themselves with their ScoobyDoos weaving and there was no requirement for the cards and dice I had brought along.



As the train slowed near Clapham Junction they both asked if we were at London. I told them they were only about 15 minutes away and to my surprise they both expressed disappointment. “It goes so quick when you’re on a train, I don’t want to get there yet”. As we gazed out at the London suburbs, I realised we had stopped opposite a poster advertising the stage musical, “Chitty Chitty Bang Bang”. Great delight from both, and I braced myself for the question, “can we go and see that Dad?, not because I didn’t want to tell them “No” but because I didn’t want to give away the secret that I had already booked tickets. But the question never came, which was a wonderful relief. I was full of love of and relief for their undemanding attitude.

Waterloo

Stepping out onto the Waterloo platform, the heat hit us and I immediately realised I should have brought the suntan cream, which was sitting on my kitchen shelf. Relax, an opportunity will arise. The girls were of course blown away by the size of the Waterloo concourse, and I realised for the first time how well naturally lit it was. Zoë saw the glass roof high above and then noticed that there was another roof above the departures display. Why? I figured that it was to make the thing readable in sunlight but I smiled at the thought that I had never noticed this or thought about it before.

And there, (serendipity!) was a Boots shop on the platform. It was very busy, and I entrusted Zoë with a bottle of water she had selected, some sun-block and a £10 note. She looked so small in the queue, but she handed me the goods and the change with a smile. I was having fun already.



Next stop was the London Eye. Zoë had been up it already, and had expressed some nervousness about going up again, so it was an easy choice to sacrifice an admittedly exciting adventure for others that lay ahead. The girls had seen it from the train and I think they were impressed by its size and majesty. I paused to take some juxtaposition shots and was relieved to see massive queues, even for those with tickets. At this stage, Zoë and Emily were probably a little overwhelmed, not least by the heat, and I congratulated myself on the next stage of The Plan. “Shall we go to the hotel and get rid of our luggage?”

The Hotel

Of course, if I had told them that the hotel was on the other side of London and we had to get on a tube, they would have accepted it with no objection, for they had no concept of what kind of journey would have been involved. “I think it’s right here”, I confidently asserted, for I had booked us in at the Marriott County Hall, courtesy of Marriott Rewards points gained in a previous life, and I knew it was nearby but I had no idea how to get in. It was Zoë who spotted the sign first, and we managed to find our way in to a rear entrance, which was in fact the Saatchi Museum.



If you are not familiar with County Hall, it is the old GLC building to the right of The Eye, and it hosts the Marriott Hotel. Our room would have been just under the tall, grey building in the background.

Thus started a somewhat surreal experience. We were in a museum, there was drilling going on, construction work, and through a small door we spied a darkened, empty theatre in which a silent black and white film of Chinese history was flickering. “I’m sure this is the place”, I tried to comfort them, but I could see they were getting spooked out. We had seen a glass-doored entrance into a room which looked like a hotel but there was a clear “No Entry” sign written on it, so we explored further, went down some stairs and found some people at a reception desk. Not the hotel reception, but some kind of reception to the greater “County Hall” experience. We were advised that the glass door we had seen was the required entrance so, shaking our heads, we climbed the stairs again and found the door. As it opened without resistance Zoë noticed that the No Entry sign was written in reverse - it indicated that there was no access to the museum from the hotel. Doh!

Now we were in plush, carpeted, corporate, air-conditioned surroundings that smelled “Hotel”. And there was a reception, who were aware of my reservation, though not on quite the terms (totally free) that I had understood. Never mind, this was no time for quibbling, and a compulsory £50 upgrade for a River View room and access to the “Executive Lounge” turned out to be good value for money. Still, we had turned up early and our room wasn’t yet ready, but “I’ll see what I can do”. Meanwhile, Zoë and Emily were waiting by the concierge’s desk, munching complimentary apples, being patient like so many other children wouldn’t be. About 15 minutes.

At last we were told that we had a room, and the delightful receptionist gave us a tour of the facilities, and explained to me “sotto voce” how we could access the (secret) Executive Lounge and Swimming Pool treats to be enjoyed later. And she showed us to the lifts – little was I to expect how such an everyday facility would prove to provide such great entertainment later.

And this would be the key, learning again how to see things through the eyes of a child. And the key, so to speak, would prove to be the next thrill when we arrived at the second floor and the door of room 241. Although the girls rejected my assertion that this gold Marriott credit card was in fact a door key, they found that they could put it in the hotel room door, pull it out, a light would flash and the door would open. What thrills! And this was going to be something that they had to do in turns – “*but Emily did it last time!*”

Once inside the room, we appreciated different things. I liked the view of the Houses of Parliament, but of course they had had a much better view moments earlier, so what was the big deal in peering out of a small window at the view? The bathroom was “cool”, the telephone you could use while sat on the toilet was hilarious and they didn’t realise you could listen to the TV while seated until we had departed on Sunday –“**COOOOL !!**”

No, the real WOW was from Zoë when she opened the TV cabinet and saw the display welcoming Mr David Hare. Total Amazement. Now, if I think back to the first time I had experienced that, fifteen years ago perhaps, yes this was pretty cool. Zoe was so excited she was exploring everything, including the minibar, and then I suddenly clicked back into adult mode. “*No, don’t*” I gasped as she started lifting out the bottles. As I feared, there was a sign that explained that anything moved would be considered purchased.

I think I first experienced this phenomenon many years ago in a small German town, and had been told that it was because guests were in the habit of removing bottles, drinking the contents, refilling the bottles with water and replacing them, avoiding being charged. As a result, hotel minibars implemented a technology that could detect the simple removal or even movement of bottles. This was a difficult thing to explain to Zoë, especially in such a smart hotel, but she told me that the extent of the damage (i.e. what she had moved) was a miniature bottle of gin. Realising that I would have to pay for it, and that she would not realise how much these things cost, I decided to partake of a rather decadent early-afternoon gin and tonic and diffuse the issue!



After some sprawling on luxury beds, an explanation of the process of “turning down” and the possible arrival of chocolate (“really?”), we decided to set off on our next adventure, a visit to the Science Museum.

I was quietly pleased that I had set no time-specific agenda, and was relishing the opportunities to explore the little things. We needed to explore the small plastic buttons on the floor of the corridor (I still have no idea what they were for) and, surprisingly, they wanted to go to the “Executive Lounge”.

The Executive Lounge



Great fun was had negotiating the lift (all Zoë's claims that she didn't like lifts seemed to have been forgotten) and, joy, the Executive Lounge required key-card access – "it's *my* turn!" Inside, it was surprisingly small, but it was a place of wonder for Zoë and Emily. Empty, full of free fruit, soft drinks, luxurious furniture, a television and fax machines, visited only occasionally by a very friendly lady who brought even more food and Cokes, this business sanctuary became our little secret Den, and we were to return on more than one occasion.

To The Science Museum

Our first appointment for the day was the Science Museum. I had offered the Natural History Museum, but the Science got the vote. I was glad, because I knew that there were plenty of hands-on, interactive experiences there but I would not have been at all surprised if the girls had opted for dinosaurs, whales hanging from the ceiling and lots of cute bunnies. Not a big deal decision, really, because the two museums are next to each other, which was part of my Flexibility-And-Non-Time-Critical-Relaxation strategy. In organising this weekend, I had the maxim that I did not want to be hurrying them on to the next appointment. It had to be fun, relaxed.

Perhaps I took it a little far. In my relaxed attitude I had not worked out exactly which tube to go to, but I decided that, rather than walk back to Waterloo, it would be a good idea to walk over Westminster Bridge and take in the river, the Houses of

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Parliament and Big Ben. Take the tube from Westminster. The District Line will take us to the museums.



And as we crossed the bridge I snapped a few pictures, flicked open “London - Take The Kids” and figured out that the museums were between South Kensington and Gloucester Road tube stations, probably just closer to the latter. We found the tube station and, as I should have expected, the fun began when we had to first, put our cards into the machines to let us through (£3.10 for all three of us for a day, bargain!) and then descend the

escalators. Finding the right line, the right platform, this was all a great interest for Zoë, and then the train itself was fun, if crowded. “What are those things hanging from the ceiling Dad? Father demonstrated by precariously swinging from a remote handle as we negotiate a violent corner.

As we ascended into the blinking 2pm sunshine at Gloucester Road, even Executive-Lounge-fed tummies were rumbling. I had thought we might test the museum café,



but there was a decent looking place over the road, and it had a terrace, and it felt right to me. A happy sunny day, go with the flow. My receipt tells me it was The Patisserie at 77, Gloucester Road. We were ushered out of the sun and onto a table at the back situated right next to a very powerful fan and a very large African woman who looked Royal. Right behind our table was a large

stack of breakfast cereals. The service was quirky, the food average, but I loved it. So did my companions. They had a relaxed style. No glasses for the 7-Up.

At The Science Museum



It was a longish walk, but no complaints. It should have been a short walk, but more of that later.

We were focused on seeing the Wellcome Wing, which is full of Interactive Stuff. I picked up a floor plan and was engaging a guide when Zoë offered up the map and explained to us all how we could get to the Wellcome Wing. The guide concurred that she had it right. We found “Launch Pad”, on the ground floor, after wandering through other exhibits, of which the most appealing to Zoë (“Wow”) was the stacked cars and the floor-to-ceiling

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ring displaying digital messages. (You can see the cars in the background of this image I found from the internet). It was becoming clear that it had been a good decision to focus on “just” the Wellcome Wing, because it was huge in itself. Perhaps this wasn’t apparent to Z and E as we entered the Launch Pad, which was just the ground floor of a huge exhibit.



Launch Pad was fun, full of ways of exploring why Science does weird things. Zoë and Emily spoke to each other over a 30m gap by talking into radio telescopes, saw something roll uphill, took pictures of their shadows, tried to shake hands with themselves, fitted puzzles together, and much, much more.



Here we see Emily engaged in some activities, including creeping up on a burglar alarm without lighting the red lights.

Emily formed a strong bond with a team of children who were shovelling, cranking, pouring and winding lentils around a long circuitous production line. This activity was continuing to engage her for 15 minutes or more. At regular intervals, while we were enjoying ourselves with these activities, there would come an occasional Loud Announcement, in the style of 1970's British Rail, in that it was Very Loud, even frightening. You could not decipher a single syllable because of the distortion. Once, Zoë and I were solving 3-D puzzles (well, it was just her, actually - I couldn't figure them out) together at the reception desk when the woman next to us picked up a microphone and announced that

“BBBBWWWATHHHERXXXEXINFIVEMINUTESVERWILLLLBNBBBBLL LSHPLLLLLLLLLLLLLLSCUMNNNNNNNTHDRRRRRRRRRRRSWLLLSHH TSSSN”.

At the end of this frightening ordeal, Zoë, continued trying to teach me how to unlink two clearly inseparable chains, which she duly separated in approximately ten seconds but could not explain how it was done to her Dense Father. Perhaps in deflection, and perhaps in curiosity, I inquired of Foghorn Leghorn what she had just announced. (I had already asked the Science Museum T-Shirted Staff-Expert-Explainer-Of-How-to-Unlink-Unlinkable-Chains seated behind the desk but he had no idea either). Discarding her microphone, FL explained that there was to be a “Bubble Show”. Thinking positively, I thought that this could be an opportunity to (a) distract Emily from becoming a founder member of a lentil shovelling Trade Union and (b) save my embarrassment of not being able to unlink the chains.



The Bubble Show was fab. It explained surface tension, created cubic bubbles and ghost bubbles of liquid carbon dioxide and even set light to bubbles of methane. There were willing volunteers on the stage, two of whom I know.

Onwards and Upwards. We climbed to explore the rest of the Wellcome Wing, including “Who Am I?” and Digitopolis. After seeing how Zoë would look when she is an old lady, driving some robots, sending bizarre messages via wireless technology, seeing ourselves captured on surveillance cameras and much, much more, we were told that the museum was closing. Three hours had gone in a flash.

Outside, I explained that we needed to get back onto the tube and Zoë gently suggested that perhaps we should go via South Kensington station, as it was at the end of the road. I felt such a fool! Granted, there was a long underground walk to South Ken, but it did seem a lot closer than Gloucester Road – I blame my map!

The tube was still proving a great source of enjoyment, and I think Zoë definitely understood more about choosing a line and a platform.

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My loose agenda was still on plan, though we were all hungry. From Piccadilly Circus we strode up Regent St, smiling at the bicycle cabs and turning sharp right into Hamleys. We visited all but one floor, using the Harry Potter stairs on the way down, and enjoyed Ghost Bubble guns (redolent of the carbon dioxide bubbles in the Science Museum show), flying discs that could boomerang and bounce off the floor and the amazing radio-controlled Hovercopter that hit Dad on the head.



We were out by 7pm, still on schedule apart from food and soon found Argyll St near Oxford Circus. And there was the Palladium, loudly announcing that it was hosting the Chitty Chitty Bang Bang stage show. Emily reacted in much the same way as she had done when she had seen the poster on the train, pleasure but no expectation. So I knelt down and told her that we were all going to see it. “Oh”, she said, with a smile. Zoë, perhaps realising what a Big Deal this was, reacted with somewhat more astonishment.

I had other things on my mind right now - hungry children. We had 25 minutes and the decent looking Italian restaurant was full, as you would expect it to be at 7pm in the theatre district on a Saturday night. Still, should I have pulled out of the Science Museum half an hour early in exchange for a restaurant meal? No, and there’s Fred’s Café on the corner. We had to pay before we got the food, but we sat outside and wolfed down some below average pasta. The nag in the stomach had gone and we were soon seated in Row W at The Palladium, full of anticipation.



As the show kicked off, we soon hit Emily’s favourite songs – “You Two” and “Toot Sweets” and she was singing along. Then the theme song, and everyone was clapping along. The singing was first class, the sets were magnificent. The plot had changed subtly from the film the girls knew, sacrificing the “story” sequence for a more premeditated threat from the Vulgarians, and a comic turn from the two spies, pretending to be British so that they could buy the car without suspicion. “Couldn’t we just speak English but be Vulgar?”, asked the Short One. “No”, came the objection, “that’s for Americans”. A brave joke for this audience!

Just before the interval, the car climactically rose to the stage from a trapdoor to great applause. But it was clear that something was wrong, because Chitty was leaning to one side. Caractacus Potts didn’t beat about the bush and said, in character, that the car had too much of a tilt and Mr Biggins would have to look at it. With that, the

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curtains descended and we were told that there had been a technical hitch, and we would have to wait for ten minutes or so. I was thinking that this could be the end of the whole show, because I was aware of the stunts that were due to follow, but pretty much on time, the curtains rose and Caractacus made some ironic jokes about the unreliability of his inventions and we were off again. And perhaps it was the relief, or sheer exhilaration, that brought tears to my eyes as the car launched off into the heights of the theatre as the first half of the show climaxed. As we rose from our seats to get a half-time drink, Emily asked why I was crying and I didn't really know the answer.



An hour later the show reached its celebratory end, and with Truly Scrumptious' shooting the air balloon in which the Children Catcher (Alvin Stardust) tried to make his escape, shards of glittery "balloon" fell to the earth. As the curtains drew, Emily and then Zoë raced to the front to pick up pieces from the floor. I think they enjoyed it!

I knew they were tired but the adrenalin got us home via Westminster Bridge, Big Ben, the Houses of Parliament, the Eye and the hotel magnificently lit. This was really a bit too perfect.

Sunday June 19th 2005

Expecting a late night, I had scheduled a relaxing day, with a couple of surprises up my sleeve. Emily woke at 7:30 and Zoë a little later, letting me know that I had been snoring at 3am. So sorry, mate, so sorry. “That’s OK, Dad”. At least she told me.

Breakfast was held in the Executive Lounge, which was nearly empty and very relaxed. Better than a monster breakfast downstairs. And then they got into Emily’s invented game of everyone pressing the button to summon one of the three lifts. If yours came first you could get in and then the others would race you to the hotel room. Or to the swimming pool. Poor old Emily usually was left behind and once went up rather than down, but she found her way back on her own, laughing. A resourceful seven year-old!

I asked them if they fancied a swim, and they told me they had no costumes, but of course I had smuggled them into the baggage. We had a great time playing Bulldog, It and splashing around for an hour and a half, and this was a perfect set-up for the day, though we did not yet know that the temperature was to hit 33c.



Off on the tube, this time for lunch at the Rainforest Café on Shaftesbury Avenue, an underground restaurant full of animals, noises and fun. Average food at above average prices, but this was a fun break, and we were in the cool.

We now walked south through Leicester Square, where there was a rather bizarre display of wrecked cars and smashed statues. It was all for the premiere of “War of the Worlds” and, as we left the square, the streets were cordoned and people were leaning over the barriers in anticipation of something. I suggested to the girls that maybe Tom Cruise would be there later, though I did not guess that he would have later been upset at a Channel 4 interviewer soaking him with a joke microphone!



Everything was working like a dream. At Trafalgar Square there was an Asian band playing, people dancing. And we could sit on the edge of the pond in the intense heat, with the light wind blowing cooling spray on us.

Before descending once more into the Tube, we checked out the world’s smallest police station, built into a lamppost on the South West corner of the square. Not many people know that.

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Our one remaining fixture was a tour on London Duck Tours at 2:30. I had planned this as a last memory on a quiet day, before we set off home, and this was to be Zoë and Emily's only bit of conventional tourism. I wanted Zoë to see Buckingham Palace, Downing St and all that stuff, however briefly. And the tour climaxes by this reconditioned American D-Day landing craft plunging into the Thames for a half-hour's river tour.



The point at which the Duck entered the river was right next to the MI6 building, or Legoland as its employees call it.



There was some synchronicity going on here. It was, an SBS man, working as a bodyguard, who had told me on the outset of our trip that it was “not nice to take pictures of other people's children”. At this point I hadn't taken a single shot of anything. The children in question were Brooklyn and Romeo, and his warning convinced me that these were the Beckham children sitting opposite us. My ears had pricked up when “Nan”, whom I now know to be Jackie Adams, had been issuing instructions to Brooklyn and Romeo and I had concluded that they had either been Beckhams or, possibly, the children of some wannabes. But the confrontation by the hired bodyguard left me in no doubt that these were the real deal. “I'm sorry, but I am going to have to ask to see your pictures, because I think you sneaked one”, SBS Man said, as we left the bus. Being unaware of my strict legal position but very much aware that these boys could do you irreparable damage outside of the law, I handed over my camera. He flicked through my snaps, and found nothing of any consequence.

While this was all rather exciting, it hadn't helped my concentration on the trip. Swings and roundabouts. And you can see Emily had a good time. Poor old Zoë, I fancy, was nursing a desire for the loo which she had announced ten minutes before we were due to depart. No complaints from her, what a trooper! These are some special children.

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Once we had picked up our bag from the hotel, it only remained to walk to Waterloo and catch our return train. Normally, you expect end-of-weekend let-down at this point, but the girls were still buoyant, enjoying the train journey, not wanting it to be over. Emily concentrated on her ScoobyDoos. Zoë was going to write some notes about the weekend, just a page of bullets which we could expand on in a fortnight's time. Three pages later, she hadn't got past Saturday lunchtime.

As I close this diary on page 15, I can only say that I know what she meant.



Zoë's diary (verbatim)

Saturday

- Went on train to London, saw a Chitty Chitty Bang Bang poster. Everyone was surprised because Emily had been singing Chitty Chitty Bang Bang some songs on Ipod.
- On the way into Waterloo we saw the London Eye
- When we got into Waterloo we were wondering some of the buildings had shaded. Dad found out it was so you could read the menus.
- We had to go into Boots and get water and sun-cream because Dad had forgotten ours.
- Then we walked to the London Eye we felt boiling. Dad said should go into the hotel, we asked dad if it was close. He said it was.
- We started walking along, we saw Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. We couldn't seem to find the hotel./ Dad knew it was a Marriot hotel and it was somewhere near the County Hall.
- We found a building and went inside there was a drilling noise and a strange flickery film on, also some creepy music.
- We went down some stairs and asked a man and a lady where to go to get to the Marriot hotel.
- They told us to go up the stairs and turn left to go through the glass doors.
- So we went up the stairs, (that had a dragon pattern on it) turned left and went through the glass doors (which had NO ENTRY back to front)
- We went to check in, but we had to wait for a long time because we had arrived a bit too early. We had also booked a riverside view and executive lounge by mistake.
- Luckily there was one room.
- The Ground floor of the hotel was really cool, the lady showed us round the Rotunda lounge.