

Chapter 20 Nottingham 2005



Sunday, October 16, 2005, Nottingham, U.K.

First, they had to reboot the plane. Really! After we were all on board for my flight to Amsterdam, the pilot came on and said, “You know how sometimes your computer doesn’t work right and you have to reboot? Well, that’s happening with one of our computers here, and we’ve tried Ctrl-Alt-Delete and it didn’t work. So, we’re going to shut down everything electrical in the plane and then start it up again.” They did, it worked, and our flight was fine.

20. Nottingham 2005

When I arrive in a country these days, the first thing I look for is a cash machine, to get local currency. Sometimes it's hard to find. But the first thing I saw in the airport (that's where I flew to, after Amsterdam) was a large sign saying, "CASH MACHINE." I thought, this is going to be a breeze. The British know how to make things clear. Well, not really.

I next looked around for where to get the train that I'd been told to take into Birmingham, but I saw no signs for any trains. I asked someone, and they directed me through to the next terminal, where at the far end I would find a monorail. I followed their instructions, and in the next terminal I did start seeing signs for Train, along with several others (T1, NEC) that meant nothing to me. This led me to the monorail, which wasn't to Birmingham, but just to the airport train station where I bought a ticket through to Nottingham.

As I waited there for the train, I walked up and down the platform seeing what there was to see. Near one end was a sign, "Purple Zone." A young woman was nearby, so I asked her what the purple zone was. She had no idea. I continued my wandering and found other signs for "Blue Zone" and "Gold Zone." Then, when I was checking a monitor for the time of the train, I noticed at the bottom of the screen an explanation that Standard Class passengers should board in the Purple Zone and first class in the Gold Zone. I found the young woman and told her what I'd learned. I doubt she cared all that much, but she pretended to, and we had a nice conversation until the train arrived. I was now pretty thoroughly disillusioned about UK signage. Why not just have the sign say Standard Class and First Class?

The train took only ten minutes into downtown Birmingham (which the young woman had told me is the second largest city in the UK), to the New Street Station. On the platform I saw a sign "Way Out" and followed it, which was a small mistake. It took me out of what I later learned was a side entrance to the station, missing the main station where there was a waiting room and such. But I did see that I now had more than an hour before my train to Nottingham, so I decided to explore.

I walked up the street leading away from the New Street Station, and in one block came to...New Street. This turned out to be a major shopping street that had been converted to a nice pedestrian mall, and that fronted on a large indoor shopping center as well. What's more, a whole block of New Street to my left was filled with large open-air stalls selling things – some sort of special one-day fair they were having. Best of all, since I had time to kill, on the corner was a Starbucks! I got myself a tall coffee to go and then explored the street.

At least half of the stalls were selling things from France, which must have been the theme of the event. One had cheeses, another breads, another sausages, and so forth. There were a decent number of people shopping, although it wasn't at all crowded (this was Sunday morning, about 11 AM). One stall had great heaps of all sorts of nuts, and I asked if he expected to sell them all. He said yes.



New Street Station in 1962, from Wikipedia 2023

I also looked at the storefronts along the street, and inside some of them. There were a couple of slot machine establishments, lots of clothes stores, and surprising numbers of realty and mortgage companies. It all seemed very well kept and upscale, but I noticed when I looked down the side streets lots of “To Let” signs, so I don’t think Birmingham is doing quite as well as it would like. The architecture was a mixture of grand old buildings that had been restored and very modern structures.

I didn’t kill quite enough time on New Street, however, and when I returned to the station I still had more than a half hour to wait. I asked about a waiting room and that was when I was told where to find the main part of the station. Even there, though, I had a hard time finding it. There were a couple of coffee shops where you could sit, but I’d just had my Starbucks and didn’t need that. The waiting area turned out to be tucked behind a coffee shop and through a door that didn’t immediately look like it was for the public. I sat there until time for my train, reading and listening to a pair of young women talking nearby, one of them with the sort of voice you could build a sitcom around.

When I reached Nottingham, once again I made the mistake of following a “Way Out” sign and exited at the side of the station rather than the front, where the taxis were. After I’d straightened that out, I climbed into one of the distinctive British taxis. It didn’t seem old, so apparently they still make taxis in the old British style: tall, black, and boxy with lots of room inside for people and luggage, and with some of the seats that fold up against the



British taxi from Wikipedia 2023

20. Nottingham 2005

partition behind the driver. There's no trunk, but plenty of room for luggage on the floor in front of the seats. Every time we turned, my suitcase slid from one side of the taxi to the other.



My instructions were to direct the taxi to the Porter's Lodge at Hugh Stewart House. The driver got me to the House itself, but he had no idea where the Porter's Lodge was, and ringing the bell on the house didn't do anything. I'd also been given the Porter's phone number, so the driver called that and got word that the Porter would walk round to where I was. I paid the driver and waited. Soon a man appeared at the end of the drive, and he started to say, "I know who you are. You are Mr..." but then he trailed off. For he had been going to say a Japanese name, and he had decided that wasn't me and he *didn't* know who I was. He dithered a bit before deciding that he'd better go back and check his records, lest he give me the key to a room that belonged to someone else. I waited some more, until he came back with apparently the same key that he'd brought before. I don't know how he had resolved the problem. In any case, he was happy to show me to my room, and show me around.

The only problem with that, though, was that he apparently had never done this before, and didn't know his own way around. It seems that his main job is as Porter for a large dormitory that adjoins this house, and the house itself had only recently been converted to use as a guest house. Perhaps someone else had handled this duty before – I don't know

Travels of a Trade Economist

– but in any case, he took me through the house opening doors and knowing little more than I did about what he would find. We learned about the house together.

The house is a very grand place, with arched doorways and vaulted ceilings. Upstairs it has four guest rooms, each with its own newly and beautifully remodeled bathroom. Downstairs there's a conference room, a guest's lounge, a kitchen, a dining room, and a small half bath with antique fixtures. I'm here alone, but someone will come in the morning and lay out a continental breakfast for me. Meanwhile, I have the run of the house.

The Porter's name turned out to be Steve Ellis. I say turned out, because I had to ask him, and he was then very embarrassed that he wasn't wearing the name tag that he usually has. He apologized for that several times, as he talked to me a length about his job as Porter, the history of the place, and some conversation he'd had with one of the students earlier in the day. He went on for quite a while.

At some point I asked how old this house is. He clearly didn't know, but he said he had a book he could give me which would tell its history, and he promised to bring it to me a bit later. By that time, I'd found some things while exploring the house, and I wanted to show him. I think I inadvertently got payback for the time he'd spent talking to me, because I may have then made him late for an appointment.

What I'd found was a cupboard in my room that was full of stuff, including several women's tops, two pairs of shoes, some magazines and guidebooks in Chinese characters, and several boxed gifts with one including a card addressed to Mr. Ping. I figured that Mr. Ping might want this stuff, but Steve mentioned an Asian visitor during the summer who, we decided, must have left these things on purpose because he didn't have room in his luggage. Why nobody had removed them from the cupboard, I don't know.

I spent the rest of the afternoon partly reading and partly walking around the grounds surrounding this house. It is early fall, and there are lots of trees and other greenery here, some of it turning to fall colors. The back of the house itself is covered with ivy that's a deep red.

Inside the house I had some difficulty getting comfortable. There are several wonderful couches in various rooms, but only one rather stiff upholstered chair, and none of these have light nearby for reading, nor tables for holding the cup of coffee I had made. I eventually moved a coffee table to where it would work, with light from a chandelier. Even though one of the rooms has a wall lined with books, the place isn't really laid out for reading.

This evening two of the department members I've known before (a German named Udo Kreikemeijer and a New Zealander named Rod Falvey) picked me up at 7:00 and we went to dinner at a Thai restaurant. They'd picked this restaurant mainly because it was

20. Nottingham 2005

about the only thing open on Sunday. Apparently, Nottingham natives don't go out to eat on Sundays. Despite this reason for selecting it, the food was very good.

I'm now about to go to sleep, nestled in a bed piled with pillows and under a thick comforter.

Wednesday, October 19, Ann Arbor

I'm home, after an easy and uneventful trip.

On Monday I found continental breakfast laid out for me in the dining room, with considerably more there than I was prepared to eat and nobody else to share it. I walked the short distance to the Sir Clive Granger Building where the Economics Department is located and was soon settled into an office with all the necessities: a computer and fresh coffee. The building, it was explained to me, was named The Clive Granger Building only recently when Granger won the Nobel prize. Then, even more recently, "The" was changed to "Sir" when he was knighted. It was fortunate that these two words were the same length, simplifying the change in signage.



Sir Clive Granger Building, University of Nottingham, from Web 2023

The next two days were, for me, a pleasant mixture of preparing my lectures, giving them, and dining repeatedly with various Nottingham colleagues. I was impressed, as I have been before, with Nottingham as an attractive town and the University as a lively and intellectually stimulating place. But there really wasn't much of interest for me to report here.

Travels of a Trade Economist

Except, perhaps, the faucets. I had noticed in my room at the guest house that, although the bathroom was newly remodeled, the sink had separate faucets for hot and cold. I prefer warm water, not hot or cold, for washing and for brushing my teeth, and there was no way to get that. Then at the university, I found the same thing. I asked one of the colleagues on our way to lunch about this, and he agreed that this was the usual design, in his experience. And he agreed that it was a problem, particularly in public restrooms where they typically do not include any kind of stopper for the drain, so you can't mix hot and cold water in the basin. Instead, you find yourself moving both hands back and forth between the two taps as you wash, being first too hot and then too cold. His demonstration of doing this convinced me that he'd had a lot of practice. I gathered, though, that the only fault he saw with this arrangement was the lack of a stopper. With a stopper, he would, I presume, fill the basin and wash his hands in that. That's not something I've thought of doing since I was a kid, but I tried it later in the day. It worked fine for washing, except that it took rather a long time. But to rinse I need to drain the water out and struggle with the two taps again.

On Wednesday I got up early to begin my trip home. Sue Berry, the secretary at the Department who had made my arrangements, had given me careful instructions for the trip, which would consist of a taxi to the train station at 6:30, a train to Birmingham at 7:09, and then a quick train to the Birmingham airport. At 6:30 I stepped out front of the guest house to find the taxi. It wasn't there. She'd also given me a phone number for the taxi service (with instructions for various prefixes), so I dialed that on my cell phone and got the taxi dispatcher. He said the taxi was waiting for me, but the driver couldn't see me, and of course I couldn't see the taxi. The dispatcher asked both of us to describe where we were, from which we established that we were not in the same place. Then – and I forget which one of us figured this out – we realized that the guest house had two driveways, and while I was waiting at one, he had used the other, taking him out of sight around the corner of the house. He drove back around, found me, and everything was fine. I'm still wondering whether, if I hadn't had a cell phone, I'd still be in England.

20. Nottingham 2005