

WATCHING THE BRITISH BEHAVE

Before Americans have a ceremony of any kind, the Brit's knowledge of how to do it should be studied with real care. And, it is clear to me that there is more involved than just practice.

On several occasions we have been in England for various kinds of events. Three times we have been in London on Remembrance Day, the celebration of the end of WWI, celebrated on the Sunday before November 11.

There is a very formal service at Westminster Abbey, all of London is silent at 11Am, and immediately after that there is a march of veterans past the Cenotaph at Whitehall. Members of the Royal Family are in attendance. We have actually seen WWI veterans participate, though there were only a few, and each one was in a wheel chair.



The Cenotaph

It is the ceremony in Westminster Abbey that attracts my attention. The Abbey is reserved for representatives of each major military element and other national dignitaries. Ushers wear uniforms and rows of medals, and formality reigns.

With every detail planned weeks in advance, the question arises, what if there is a surprise of some kind, and an important person arrives unexpectedly? No problem at all, for maybe twenty chairs or so are reserved just for this

possibility. Those chairs are located immediately beside Sir Isaac Newton's tomb and are almost the best seats in the abbey. But is it likely that a surprise important visitor will appear? No! What then should be done with chairs that are empty? Why seat someone there—at the very last moment.

Suppose an American tourist arrives at the door of the Abbey, and seeks admittance. He will be turned away, of course. But suppose he arrives about two and a half or three minutes before the service is to start. Well it just so happens that a seat is available, and he will be ushered to it, quickly.

How I found out about this I am not sure, but on three occasions I arrived, twice with other family members, at just the right moment, and we participated in this exceedingly remarkable Westminster Abbey Service. We saw almost everybody who was anybody. Afterward the Abbey participants exit to the area reserved for them immediately adjacent and they can watch the long parade of hundreds, even thousands, of veterans and members of military units.

On more than one occasion we have also been present when the Queen opened Parliament. Twice we stood near the monument in front of Buckingham Palace to see the coaches pass by with the Scepter, the Crown, and the Queen, each in its own coach. Another time we were at the Houses of Parliament to see the Queen arrive there. We were also present at Parliament once when President Eisenhower was visiting there. These were splendid moments, and no difficulty was over noticed. Each participant did everything quite correctly at precisely the correct moment.

Then there is the Lord Mayor's Parade, and we have watched that twice from the steps of St. Paul's Cathedral. Everybody is much more informal for that affair, but compared with the way we do things, formality still reigns.

There is a truly big scene at Prince Albert Hall on Saturday night preceding Remembrance Day. The King of Norway always attends for example, as do various members of the Royal Family. One year as we watched the carriages arrive at the entrance, everything seemed to be in order; the Royals arrived in the proper sequence, and last two being the Queen Mother and her Lady in Waiting, and then the Queen herself. Once that happened, the police quickly removed the barricades and observers dispersed. Except for us. We had struck

up a wonderful conversation with a delightful Scottish lady who came to London for this event each year. She had lots of great stories.

Quite suddenly there was a flurry of activity, a couple of barricades were rushed into place, when a splendid royal automobile suddenly arrived, and Princess Diana stepped out and quickly entered the building.

The next day the story was in all the newspapers, as this was the first time in about four centuries that anyone had arrived after the Monarch! It seems that Princess Di had had a quarrel with Prince Charles, announced she was not going, and after he departed she changed her mind.

Another time we were in York when Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher arrived for an important ceremony and we learned that you don't have to be Royal to get proper attention.

We were also present once when the Queen Mother arrived at Westminster Abbey, and it was impressive indeed to see the huge double row of banners laid on the ground, two by two, as she entered. She was treated not just with respect, but seemingly with reverence.

In every one of these events we could see that things are done in a certain way, and *always have been!* Apparently there need not be any information disseminated. The participants and the observers all know just what to expect.

One of our great moments happened the day after we read in the London Times that the Queen of the Netherlands was making her first state visit to England, and would arrive at the pier on the Thames near Parliament the next morning. Addie Leah and I decided to go, and we arrived quite early and sat on a bench very close to the river and royal pier—the one with the red carpet. We were quite certain that we would be moved when the time came, but it was a good spot, and we settled in. Not too long afterward the police arrived and began placing the proper barricades. They gave us the eye, but left us alone, and the barricades were behind us. Eventually there was a pretty good crowd of onlookers, but none were near us at all.

The Queen of the Netherlands finally arrived with Prince Charles as her host: he had met her at Greenwich where she arrived from Holland with her Dutch

Admirals. Shortly before her arrival, the Royal Carriages came in a long row behind us. There was the Queen and Prince Phillip, and a whole string of carriages, each one just magnificent.

When Queen Beatrice was just stepping on the gang plank to make it ashore where Queen Elizabeth was waiting, there was a British Admiral standing to her right, and a Dutch Admiral was standing to his right. I don't recall just who was on Queen Beatrice's left. At the most dangerous moment, Queen Beatrice tripped and pitched to her right. She was headed for the Thames! The British Admiral moved not a muscle. The Dutch Admiral reached across in front of him, and grabbed the Queen just in time. There was laughter, and pleasantries.

Addie Leah asked however, "Why didn't the British Admiral grab her?" I thought the answer must be rooted in the Royal Navy's "do's and don'ts" book, and I am now quite sure that there is a sentence somewhere that says "Thou shalt not lay hands on a foreign Queen!"

We watched the two Queens depart in the first carriage, the two royal gentlemen being in the second carriage, and space was made in each of the other carriages for others in the Dutch Queen's entourage.

All that time we were left quite alone, having the best seats in the park!

There is an enormous value in being able to appear harmless.

Lest the reader has not noticed, the point to these particular paragraphs is to pay tribute to the Brit's ability to put on a "show". Each event is truly spectacular, but one gets the impression that the being spectacular is not the purpose; rather it is an opportunity to demonstrate deep and even sacred respect for the person and/or historical moment at hand. It is quite impossible for Americans to compete.