

## "TWO TRAVEL STORIES"

by Geoffrey R Usher

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It was about twenty years ago that I had lunch in the Travellers Rest Hotel on the A625 road between Bamford and Hope, just at the junction with the road that runs through Brough and Bradwell and up behind Abney to get to Great Hucklow, near Sheffield.

With me were Dr June Bell and Rev Jopie Boeke, whom I was transporting to Great Hucklow. They had said that, in return for the transport, they would buy me a pub lunch on the way.

As it happened, we weren't very excited about what was available at the Travellers Rest. Rather than the range of meals one usually finds in rural/village pubs (fish-and-chips, scampi, various pies with vegetables or salads, ploughman's lunch, and so on) there was a limited selection of bar snacks, such as sandwiches and burgers, perhaps with chips, perhaps with a bit of salad. Nothing exotic or fancy or exciting, but enough for us to have a quick, simple meal and a drink before going on to Great Hucklow.

We very soon discovered that, in fact, we didn't want to stay there long. The chap behind the bar was surly, and gave the impression that he would have been happier if we weren't there to bother him. And there were two sources of background noise, rather than just the usual unnecessary muzak. There was a television set which we could not see, around the corner from our alcove near the door and obviously for the patrons in the bar area. When we arrived it was broadcasting a cricket match, so it was not particularly noticeable: cricket commentators don't usually go in for lots of shouting and hysteria. But then the sports programme switched from cricket to car racing, so as well as the noise of the cars themselves there was the almost incoherent hysterical babble of the racing commentator.

And, from elsewhere in the bar area, competing with the racing noise in volume and incoherence, was the noise of the so-called music on a tape or CD.

So that we could have our conversation a little more easily, we asked Mr Surly-behind-the-bar whether the volume of the music (and/or the television commentary) could be turned down – or even off in the case of the music. His response was: "The customers like it." He seemed oblivious to the fact that at the time we were the only customers; and he remained unmoved.

It was only when the young waitress brought our lunches to the table and we asked her, that we got a positive response. Mr Surly was obviously not happy, but at least he did not turn the noise back up.

We finished our meal; did not stay any longer than necessary; and were happy to be on our way, although wondering whether Miss Helpful Waitress got into trouble from Mr Surly.

I never went back into the Travellers Rest. I deliberately avoided it, although I drove past it quite often. And, I confess: I occasionally recommended to other people that they not bother with it but go somewhere – anywhere – else.

A couple of years later, during the Ministerial Fellowship's Conference at Great Hucklow, I drove that way several times. The pub was empty and seemed deserted. I have no idea whether it had ceased trading and closed down, or whether it had flourished and was undergoing a major refit and refurbishment.

But, right now, I have a confession to make. My first thought was "Serve you right!" If Mr Surly usually behaved like that, and treated other customers in the same sullen, uncooperative manner that we experienced, then he would not have built up a clientele of regular customers. Passing travellers like us would not have gone there again, and may have advised their friends to look for other places. And local residents would know of the various other pubs in the neighbouring villages, some of which I know were excellent: friendly, and hospitable.

I wonder how charitable my reaction was. I certainly did not follow Jesus' injunction to forgive - not seven times - but seventy times seven.

Frank Holmes wrote:

We are aware of the inadequacy of our understanding, and of the too-often clumsy ways in which we try to serve: of how far we have fallen short of the good expected of us, and of how seldom we have succeeded in speaking the truth in love. ... Assist us, Lord, in the midst of our problems, to maintain our reasonableness and charity, to live and think and work as men and women who share in the reconciling and creative power of the spirit. ... Remind us of the divine promise of the better power entrusted to us.

In a way, it is not a matter of any concern to me whether the pub had closed and gone out of business, or was flourishing. But, reflecting on part of what Frank Holmes wrote, I know that, with respect to the Travellers Rest near Brough, I fell short.

Most Britons seem to know about the Coast-to-Coast Walk, between St Bees on the most western point of the coast of Cumbria to Robin Hood's Bay on the most eastern point of the coast of Yorkshire - or, of course, in the other direction from Robin Hood's Bay to St Bees. Either way, it's a long walk.

On Tuesday 25 July 2000, Ann and I drove to Settle, in Yorkshire, where we stayed overnight before going on to St Bees on Wednesday to spend time with Jack and Gertie Fowler. Gertie was a schoolgirl friend of Ann's mother. It took us four hours to drive home on Wednesday evening.

Four weeks later, I took the day off and Ann and I drove up to Robin Hood's Bay to spend some time with friends John and Joan who were renting a house there for a week's holiday.

We had a pleasant, relaxed day: did a bit of walking and sightseeing -- it was our first visit there -- and I was fascinated by the Music in Miniature Exhibition.

In the early evening, John, Ann and I went for a walk along the cliff-top path which overlooks the Bay and provides lovely views back over the picturesque village. It was a gentle, leisurely stroll. We met a couple of people who were out walking their dogs; and a jogger went past us, all serious and earnest puffing and blowing.

Then a man came into view, striding steadily and purposefully along. He had a small backpack -- the kind you might take with you for a day's outing -- and two walker's sticks, like short skier's stocks: light aluminium, with moulded rubber hand-grips.

He very soon reached the spot where we were enjoying the view. After the usual non-committal exchange of greetings, he asked how far it was to Robin Hood's Bay, and the Victoria Hotel there. We were able to tell him he was almost there: - just a few minutes over the brow and down into the village. His response was along the lines of: "Thank goodness! I'm just about exhausted."

Ann asked him: "Where have you come from?" We all, I think, expected him to say something like: Whitby -- or perhaps somewhere else fairly close, such as another village up the coast from Whitby. We were not prepared for his answer: "St Bees".

Our gasps and dropped jaws must have been obvious, because he then added: "Thirteen days ago." He was at the end of thirteen days of doing the Coast-to-Coast walk. No wonder he was "just about exhausted".

There was a very brief conversation as we offered our congratulations on his achievement and reassured him that he had almost reached his destination and the hot bath into which he wanted to collapse.

Then, with a wave and a word of farewell, he was gone, resuming his steady, purposeful pace. And, almost before it had all sunk in on us – certainly on me – he had disappeared from view.

We resumed our leisurely stroll, and eventually returned to the village. As we turned the corner towards the house which John and Joan were renting, we could see the Victoria Hotel on the top of the road leading down into the bay itself. We mentioned the possibility that by now our walker had checked in and was soaking in his hot bath, but we did not call in to ask whether he had got there all right.

I am happy to assume that, having succeeded in finding his way, over thirteen days, from St Bees all the way across the country to Robin Hood's Bay, he had managed not to get lost in the last mile or two. But an unanswered question remains - and I shall never know the answer: What did he do the next day? Did he get a train or a coach to travel back to St Bees? Did he set off to do the 13-day walk all the way back? Did he head off to somewhere else? Or .... ?

He was a ship that passed in the night. From his appearance and complexion, and his speech, we could guess that he was probably from somewhere on the Indian sub-continent, but a long-term resident of Britain - perhaps born there. And that he was perhaps up to sixty years old. But we knew no more detail than that about him.

The old saying is that the longest journey begins with a single step. His 13-day walk from St Bees had begun with some planning and preparation, and then the single first step. I have not tried to calculate how many steps he took over those thirteen days, but it's a big number.

I wonder what his thoughts were at that first step; and when we saw him comparatively just a few steps from his destination. One of the impressions that have stayed with me is the calmness with which he received the news of the nearness of the end. There were no wild shouts of excitement or even relief. There was really a calm, matter-of-fact acceptance of the information, perhaps because it only confirmed what he already thought, and then a resumption of his steady, purposeful pace.

Two different stories, connected only by the theme of travelling, and the people one can meet on the way. A Travellers REst which wasn't particularly restful or welcoming for three travellers, and an unknown walker, met by chance, who left a lasting impression on me.

What sort of impression do we leave with the people who happen to meet us — who happen to cross our paths — as we travel life's journey? Are we perhaps the Mr Surly — or the Miss Helpful Waitress — of the Travellers Rest, or are we the steady, purposeful walker who sets out on a long journey and steadily approaches the destination?

I finish with a short piece adapted from something written by American Unitarian minister Charles White McGehee half a century ago, entitled "A Credo For Today":

Our goals, or ideals, set the tone  
And the direction of our existence.  
We determine the true value  
Of our aspirations  
By being prepared to set them forth  
At any given moment.  
At this particular point,  
At this particular definition and defense,  
One is *not* tentative.  
This is my truth, absolute and imperative!  
It is not true, however,  
Until or unless it is activated!  
But the way is open,  
The journey is free.  
New facts, new experiences  
May shape and fashion tomorrow's credo.  
Here again I will take my stand.  
This day, each day,  
Is the most significant,  
The culmination of all days.  
Thus,  
We give ourselves meaning and growth!  
Thus,  
We give humanity purpose and dignity!