

## Lockdown: Doing the British Isles over the holiday break

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My long-time radio buddy Doug Grant<sup>1</sup> and I have both been pursuing new countries to visit for several decades. Though we haven't travelled together, we've met at his house in the USA and at my house in South Africa and in several other spots in Europe and the USA. For over a decade, we have had a plan to travel Britain together. Since the British welded their "countries" together around 1707, their status as countries is somewhat in dispute, but the list we use still lists England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Isle of Man, Wales, Jersey and Guernsey as separate entities. Ireland was also an option. Both of us had only seen a handful of these, so there was a lot of room for us to collect new countries.

Somehow, this plan has just never come to fruition. However, during 2023 Doug dropped the gauntlet by announcing that he and Karen were on a Northern Lights tour. They would pass through the UK just after new year, taking in several of the smaller "countries". Was I joining them?

I suppose there was only one answer. Both Doug and I were approaching 100 countries visited, and this might be the opportunity to finally pass that century mark. I had been stuck at 98 for four years, since before The Flu, while Doug had been creeping up to a similar number. And 98 is obviously the second-most frustrating place to get stuck.

I decided to deviate from my normal pattern. This year, I would take full advantage of my year-end break, adding a few days of leave to enable me to sneak away for a full fortnight. Unfortunately, the overlap would be limited, so I would not be able to do the full tour with them. Knowing that the weather was likely to turn nasty during my stay, I resolved to do the northern half of the UK first, returning to the south as soon as possible to minimise the risk of getting stuck.

Apart from countries, I was looking for another item to collect: I still lacked two letters to complete the available collection of Parkrun letters—"Q" and "Y". Neither is available in South Africa, but both occurred in the UK. I would make good use of the two special Parkruns on Christmas and New Year's days to finish off the alphabet and also to pick up my first Monday Parkrun. Finally, Bushy Parkrun in London was the original Parkrun venue. It must surely appear in everyone's list.

A glitch developed in my planning along the way. The Marathon marathon in November proved too good to pass up. I travelled around Greece and the Balkans for a fortnight in November, collecting 10 new countries and handsomely passing the 100 mark before completing the marathon. That trip ate into my preparation for the UK, with the result that the cheap tickets had sold out on the direct route. I had to buy tickets via Addis Ababa, which would turn both the out and return trips into tests of endurance. Also, I went for my visa interview exactly three weeks before departure. They promise a three-week turnaround, so I was hoping they would keep their promise. They did—I collected my visa the day before departure.

As is often the case with my travels, pressure of work and studies hampered thorough preparation. I left home with several loose ends.

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<sup>1</sup> Radio callsign K1DG.

## Southern England

On arrival in Britain, I first secured a SIM card, providing phone and Internet connectivity for my trip. I then jumped on a bus to Bristol. Just three days before departure, I happened to notice that a new Parkrun with a “Q” had recently opened there. Bristol would become my first stop. As I didn’t know which bus I would take, I also didn’t know where I could collect a rental car. By the time I had firmed up the bus ticket, rental car prices in Bristol had doubled. By the time the bus arrived in Bristol, they had doubled again. I found a deal at the airport that was only about three times the normal rate, necessitating another local bus trip before I could collect my car.

My next stop was to look for a feedline for my antenna. It occurred to me on the flight that I’d forgotten to pack this indispensable item. The radio and antenna were not much use without a way to connect them! My local friend Don<sup>2</sup> advised me of a radio shop in Bristol. Their phone number did not work, so I drove to their premises. I greatly enjoyed listening to BBC Radio 4, but progress was painfully slow. By the time I got there, the technician had left. I phoned his mobile number, but it was redirected to the shop.

By now, it was clear that my plans to visit the Cameron balloon factory and my friends David and Faith in Cornwall were doomed. It simply wasn’t possible to travel significant distances at this pace. Accordingly, I made my way to Don’s house. Even that 30 km trip took well over an hour.

Don was surprised to see me. I obviously hadn’t communicated as clearly as I’d thought. He was surrounded by his children and grandchildren. Still, we had some time to catch up on happenings in the 15 years or so since my last visit. We had a meal at a local pub before I checked into a local B&B for the night.

## Quakers Walk Parkrun

Saturday morning, I was off to the Quakers Walk Parkrun. The Parkrun wasn’t on Google Maps or on Waze, so I used nearby Quakers Walk instead. The name commemorates the first Quaker meeting venue in Devizes, built in 1702. Again, driving just over 30 km took more than an hour. At least the weather cleared up as I went, from pouring rain to just miserable. Near the venue, I ended up on a small road with knee-deep potholes. It was just getting worse, so I reversed and used a map to get close to the Parkrun. I arrived with only minutes to spare.



A Parkrun with a “Q”.

Parkruns in Britain are much more competitive than in South Africa. I finished in over 26 minutes in 82nd place—my third-worst placing yet. Still, I was pleased to have been able to mark off that precious “Q”.

I took a drive past the Caen Hill locks, then through Wales and past the now-closed Cameron factory. Despite several attempts, I had been unable to find decent gloves and a wool hat at a decent price. I found both at the garage where I filled up the rental car just before handing it back.

On the bus to downtown, I chatted with Esther, a Ugandan nurse who has retired to London. At the bus station, a very helpful security guard was from Somalia. The assistant loading my bag into the bus had a strong Cape Afrikaans accent. I felt right at home.

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<sup>2</sup> Radio callsign G3XTT.

On the bus, I downloaded and installed WhatsApp. Now I strongly believe that you can have a life or you can have WhatsApp, but not both. However, as I had a temporary number that would vanish when I got home, I was prepared to take the risk. During the bus trip, I chatted to Alet and Hanri in South Africa. The latter was about to leave on a long trip. I also worked on my Greek lessons, progressing to Number 2 in Duolingo's Obsidian league.

## York

I had the rear seat to myself, so I managed to get some sleep. I awoke with a start a few minutes before arrival in York at 23:00. As I walked to my hostel, I noticed medieval ramparts by the roadside. This place wasn't built yesterday! My bed was occupied by someone else, so they reassigned me to another bed, but not before waking up the offender and informing him that he would be fined. I found a meat cleaver and a shotgun shell in my pillowcase. At least I could defend myself if the need arose.

My roommates were noisy. Two of them snored loudly. There was constant movement, often with the light on. It was not a restful night. I spent some time trying to find a way to escape from York. It would not be easy. Neither buses nor trains would run until after Boxing Day.



An uncommon view of York Minster.

I was hoping to see the aviation museum, but municipal buses were not running and the museum was closed. I spent Sunday exploring the town on foot. York Minster was closed. Clifford's Tower was closed. I visited the Shambles. It was. One shop drew a long queue of international travellers. I asked some of the locals what the fuss was about. The story I was given is that some witch wrote a book on occult practices featuring a teenage sorcerer, which became world famous. These people are fans. I know it sounds unlikely, but it's all I have to work with.

Shopping in Britain was a welcome change after my Balkans trip. They have a nice feature where everything is labelled in English, so there is little need to speculate about the contents and about the consequences of eating it. In some shops, the shop assistants even speak intelligible English!

I also tried to buy an umbrella. I found a very helpful shop assistant who warned me not to buy the £ 5 umbrella, as it would be blown inside out by the wind. Instead, I was advised to buy the £ 40 umbrella with the vents from a fancy shop nearby. I protested that it was steep for an umbrella, to which he responded that it would last me a lifetime. Not to put too fine a point on it, in 60 years I have never before felt the need to own an umbrella, so I wasn't sure that durability was all that valuable. Nevertheless, I dutifully set off to the fancy shop and bought the fancy umbrella. At least I was now ready for Scotland. Let me know if you need lessons about storm umbrellas. And at least it wasn't quite £ 40.

I wasted much time getting back to my hostel. With no sun and lots of cloud, my sense of direction was not working well. I eventually managed to get back to the right riverbank. I suddenly noticed that I was walking next to the city wall again. This time, with the benefit of daylight, I managed to find a place to hop onto the wall and traversed a portion of it to the Micklegate, which I had passed through unnoticed the previous night. A plaque commemorates a siege in 1644. Like I said: definitely not yesterday.

Back in my room, the squatter had again invaded my bed. The receptionist assigned me to a new room. My neighbours were very sad to see me go, and very indignant that I took such a dim view of their squatting. The new room was much better, with only one snorer and much less fidgeting. I was grateful that I didn't need the bathroom in the two hours that one guy spent there, though. I spent half an hour in an end game for the week's Duolingo league, ending in second place and being promoted to the highest Diamond league. It was a nice touch to make it before year-end.

Monday, on Christmas day, I left the hostel early for the York Parkrun. The streets were deserted. As I approached the venue, the situation changed. Dozens of cars and hundreds of pedestrians were around. We all walked around the racecourse on a service road to gather at the start. I chatted to Arielle, who was interested to hear about my alphabet quest. She invited me to a Christmas service later in the day. I politely declined, saying that I would instead use the opportunity to catch up on much-needed sleep. The run was again intense. This time, I finished in over 26 minutes in 326<sup>th</sup> place—my worst placing ever by a factor of more than three.

I spent the day mostly in bed, doing some reading and occasionally dozing off. On Tuesday, I was out of there by 11:00, just in time to beat the check-out deadline and to make it to my bus. It was the only bus out of York that day. I chatted to an Australian girl who lived in London and who had spent the week in York for some inexplicable reason. The weather was brilliant, with a cloudless sky. I looked for flying schools around Leeds. All the flying schools were well towards York. As there were no buses out of York, it was unlikely that I would be able to use public transport. I toyed with the idea of renting a car, but the extravagant temptation was tempered by a bank of cloud rolling in from the west. By the time the bus stopped in Leeds, it was drizzling and gloomy.

## Leeds

Leeds features in this story only as a stop on a bus journey. Whether as a result of Boxing Day or just a lack of demand for travel from York to Edinburgh, I had a 14-hour layover before catching my bus to Edinburgh at 02:55 the following morning. This timetable was clearly the work of a sadist. I spent some time trying to find a layover hotel, but apart from the exorbitant fees they demanded, the police recommended that I should not be on the street at two in the morning. I therefore spent some hours in an Indian restaurant, charging my tablet as best I could while working on my Duolingo standings. My fun was somewhat spoiled when I learned that an Australian had surpassed my score of 108 countries visited, bumping me off the top spot in the southern hemisphere<sup>3</sup>. At least I had the prospect of rectifying the situation before the week was out. I returned to the bus station around 21:00.

This bus station features a total absence of charging facilities, except for the 40 p they charge for access to a urinal. It is not ideal for 14-hour layovers. I soon fell asleep on a bench. I was loudly awoken by a man in a dayglow jacket an hour later. He demanded that I sit up. When asked why, he quoted policy. I was apparently disturbing people. So I sat up and started writing this story, fully expecting to pay the price on arrival in Edinburgh. I was occasionally interrupted by announcements from Ali the dayglow Nazi that were not identifiable as English. Just for the record: No-one occupied any of the seats I had used in the remaining four hours before the bus departed. And Ali's successor for the next shift was the kindest and most helpful one could hope for. Still, Leeds will not go down as my favourite town.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://dxfc.org/>

## Edinburgh

After sitting upright in various seats the whole night, I wasn't exactly fresh when we arrived in Edinburgh. I found a rental car place just across the road, but they only opened at 09:00. The clerk opined that none of the agencies in town would have cars available, and recommended the airport. I caught a tram to the airport, arriving about an hour later. Even there, none of the agencies had cars available. I found a few options on the Internet. I booked a car through Carjet. After surrendering my credit card details, I heard nothing from them. I tried to lodge a complaint, but you can't do that without a contract number. I had to approach my bank in South Africa to ensure that they don't clean me out. I found a car on Rentalcars.com. Even this transaction wasn't without its challenges, as the agency is off the airport and just finding the shuttle bus proved a challenge. Still, I was able to collect my car around 12:00 and set off for my estate. Since they were also running low on cars, they apologised profusely that they didn't have a petrol car available. Instead, I was given a fully electric Fiat 500.

Now I'm as excited as the next guy to get the opportunity to try out an electric car, but there is an element of humiliation in having to spend five minutes staring at the buttons before being able to make the thing move. Also, I never did manage to change channels on the radio, and it took several minutes to figure out how to make the radio shut up when you get out. I eventually got the hang of it, and I confined myself to only one rocket-like acceleration, to avoid running the battery flat prematurely.

The object of my trip was twofold. Firstly, I wanted to visit my estate for the first time. Secondly, I wanted to operate my radio from Scotland.

Estate? Let me explain. I am constantly reminded that I command no respect. It is true in every aspect of my life, except maybe in ham radio. There I am respected as an emeritus, effectively a has-been. So I was very interested to read last year that owning land in Scotland legally entitles one to be called "Lord" (or "Lady", to those identify that way). I pressed my credit card into service and bought a piece of land. The title deed and a fancy certificate testifying to my right to be called Lord Chris soon arrived. Now when I say "piece of land" I am not exaggerating. Without belabouring the point, no farming or building will ever take place on that piece of land. Let's just call it a nature reserve.

Once I received my title deed, I looked up the coordinates on the map. The land is southwest of Edinburgh, about 20 km from the outskirts. More interestingly, though, the nearest town is Lamancha. Now anyone with even a modicum of cultural background must understand that this is valuable information. I immediately decided to henceforth go by the name of Lord Chris of Lamancha. The meaning is not lost on the locals either. There is a shooting range only 300 m away, named Don Coyote.

As with all my previous UK drives, this one proceeded slowly. However, one aspect was different. As I got within sight of my land, I was awed by the hills ahead, which were all clad in white. Even the road to the estate was littered with more and more snow as I got closer. I parked right next to Don Coyote. The place was abandoned except for an elderly couple and their dog. They were amused to learn the purpose of my visit, but they also had a cousin who had bought his title in the same way.

I spent some time walking around, although it wasn't exactly pleasant. The ground was snowy and muddy. The air was bitterly cold and it was constantly drizzling. I did manage to figure out how to do a panorama, more or less by accident. Great timing!



The area around my Estate. Note the white stuff on the ground and the hills.

I decided to exit to the west, although I was a little apprehensive about getting stuck in the snow. As I passed the first farm on the rutted track, I asked a local in a snow-covered vehicle for directions to Lamancha. She motioned me to follow her. Soon we entered the quaint little village. I didn't think it was appropriate to announce the Lord's arrival to the village folk.

All my attempts to organise a radio station to operate from had come to naught. This time of year is just not normal on this island. I decided that the obvious place to build my own station would be in Lamancha. It was only proper. I identified a spot and set about assembling an antenna in some trees. I sat in the car, making a few contacts into Scandinavia and Germany<sup>4</sup>. I was pleased with myself; it was less effort than some of the Balkan stops had been! Scotland was in the bag.

I made some phone calls to find out if flying would be an option. Unfortunately, the bad weather extended to all the accessible schools. At this point, my Lyca Mobile phone stopped working. Despite me paying for unlimited calls and not having made more than two dozen in the past week, they kept telling me that I was out of credit and had to pay money. A call to support resulted in an assurance of attention within 24 hours. Finding accommodation was going to be difficult. It seemed like all the affordable options were in downtown, and I didn't think the rental car had enough range to make it there and back. I drove to Dunfermline, where a few feasible options seemed to be available. Sure enough, I soon found a pleasant B&B (which doesn't offer breakfast!). A few language lessons and some furious story-writing later, and I went to sleep early to try and get rid of mild sniffles that had taken hold while building an antenna in the snow.

I felt better in the morning. I took a five-minute soak in a hot bath. The resulting interrogation came as a surprise, but it turned out that bathing was strictly *verboden*. I can't take any responsibility--the notice was written in upper case.

## Ireland

At Edinburgh airport, apart from some minor shopping, I finally managed to get in touch with Billy<sup>5</sup>. It just so happened that they were planning a commemorative operation the next day, so he sounded positively enthused to have me there. We agreed that I would take the bus to Wexford as soon as I stepped off my flight.

Doing so was easier said than done. Finding the bus stop was not easy. It turns out that Billy's helpful directions assumed that I would arrive in Terminal 1. I didn't. After finding the bus stop, I spent the 40-minute wait inside the terminal. I just didn't want to experiment with the cold air and the slight runny nose that persisted. I almost missed my bus—I got engrossed in some correspondence and noticed just in time. Billy was there to pick me up. In the bus, I had broken my tablet's charge cable. Billy led me to a Chinese shop where I could get a cheap cable for a lot of money. We arrived at

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<sup>4</sup> Radio callsign MM/ZS6EZ.

<sup>5</sup> Radio callsign EI7FJ.

Billy's house, where I met Janet. Janet was on loan from England for the holiday period. I was impressed. Most radio operations do not have a resident chef! Janet is a linguist and long-time chorister, so despite her refusal to have anything to do with ham radio, we had a lot to talk about. And we did. In her day job, Janet is a guide at the South Foreland lighthouse in Kent. There is a radio connection; Marconi made his first international contact from there in 1899.

The special radio event<sup>6</sup> was to commemorate the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Kerlogue rescue, history that I had never heard of. On 29 December 1943, the MV Kerlogue was *en route* from Spain to Ireland with a load of oranges. They rescued 168 German sailors from the Bay of Biscay, treating them to warm orange juice and taking them to neutral Ireland for the remainder of the war.

Through the evening, the crew kept arriving. I did some troubleshooting work on the station and made a few contacts with my own callsign<sup>7</sup> before going to sleep. I wanted to catch the Friday sunrise opening on a medium-wave band. Now this is my kind of sunrise opening. At home, you have to get up at an ungodly hour when people with a clean conscience are still asleep. Here, I set the alarm clock for 08:00. I was hoping for a band awash with signals, but it was not to be. I called and called and called, with only two contacts resulting. Now in case you think that I had missed the sunrise, let me mention that the one contact was in New Zealand, almost exactly antipodal to us. I moved to other bands and operated for many hours, resulting in some 400 contacts. Choosing between a handful of contacts and pneumonia on the one hand, and a warm reception with great company and great food in the lap of luxury with 400 contacts on the other, I'd go for the latter choice every time.



Billy, Janet and Paul at the breakfast table.

I was hoping to fly while in Ireland. Unfortunately, it was not to be. The local flying club near Billy's house has a Web presence which neglects to mention that they are closed for the winter, so all the attempts to contact them and even Billy taking me to the runway proved futile. Not entirely—driving around with Billy was a lot of fun. He is a curious mixture of handyman and thinker. He was a coal deliveryman for his entire career, but he completed mathematics and engineering studies part-time. He made great company. I also thoroughly enjoyed watching the interactions between Billy and the locals. Much like in South Africa, everyone seems to be related somehow.

I also managed to find time for my Greek lessons. I was surprised to be able to open a significant lead in the Diamond league. Given its reputation, I was expecting a fight. I was hoping I could keep it up with the whirlwind travels of the next two days!

On Saturday morning, Billy took me to the Wexford Racecourse Parkrun. It was cold and wet, but a man has to do what a man has to do to add a fourth country to his Parkrun totals. Later on Saturday, I caught a train to Dublin. I continued my attempts to arrange some flying, but had to conclude that

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.qrz.com/db/ei80mb>

<sup>7</sup> EI/ZS6EZ.

every school and every airport and every door was closed for this week. Accordingly, I jumped straight onto a bus for Belfast.

## Belfast

Northern Ireland constituted my 111<sup>th</sup> country. I was now back in the DXFC lead for the southern hemisphere. My competitor seems to be mostly retired and with money to burn, so I'm not holding out much hope for the long run, but I will enjoy it while it lasts.

During the 10-minute walk from the bus station, I did some shopping. The hostel is a rough place. The receptionist seemed positively relieved when I announced that I didn't do drugs. A guest was idly strumming on a guitar in the TV room. I went up three flights of stairs and fiddled with the door lock. Inside the room, I was surprised to see three of the five beds occupied in darkness. It was only 20:30. I made my bed and crawled into bed as quietly and unobtrusively as I could. To my amazement, I was still leading the Diamond league. I dozed off relatively early.

My alarm woke me up at 08:00. I was surprised, as I hadn't set it. Also, I could not get it to shut up. I shuffled off to the bathroom. The alarm definitely was not set. When I got back to the bedroom, it rang again. This time, it became clear that it was my neighbour's alarm. He hadn't bothered to kill it. On the second snooze, he got out of bed.



Kevin and his Thruster T600N.

There was no-one at reception, so I let myself out. I noticed that the guitar from the previous night had been trashed. I walked back to the bus station and figured out how to get to the airport. On the way, I spoke to a nearby flying school. To my delight, they were happy to help. My Standard Bank credit card didn't work at the rental car desk. Once in my rental car, I set off to Newtownards Airport. Kevin<sup>8</sup> was waiting for me. He is a retired prison warden who does this for fun. It shows. We flew around the area and I did two landings. Apart from the new country, I also flew a new aircraft model<sup>9</sup>, my 200<sup>th</sup>! I enjoyed the flight, but I had to keep the speed up...

My next task was a side trip to the Irish border. It's about an hour's drive, and sunset was approaching. After exploring the Ring of Gullion Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty for a while, I found a hedge next to a picket fence. I parked the car on the shoulder and started preparing to put up an antenna. An old codger emerged from the adjacent yard and berated me for trespassing on private land. I had assumed the space between the fence and the road was public land. He vehemently disagreed. Though deeply skeptical, I profusely apologised and started packing up. Just out of interest, I asked him why he was so opposed to me sitting there. He indicated that his wife looked after that sidewalk and that I should be able to see that it is so much better than all the other sidewalks in the area. I didn't have the heart to tell him. After a few more minutes of driving around, I found another suitable stop on a ridgeline. Unfortunately, darkness was fast approaching and it

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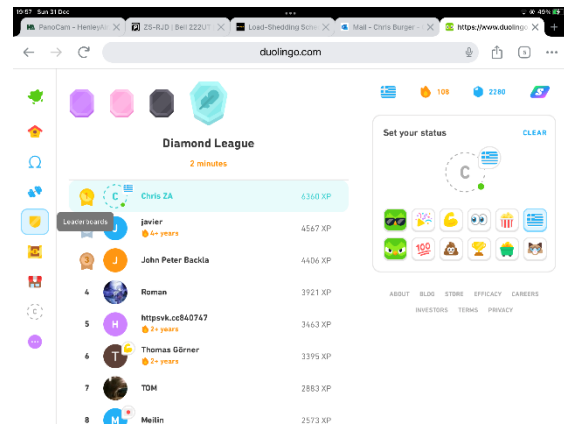
<sup>8</sup> <https://nimicrolights.co.uk/>

<sup>9</sup> Thruster T600N



was now raining. I strung the antenna in a hedge and retired to the car to make some contacts. I contacted Hungary, England, France and Spain<sup>10</sup>. This radio thing really is magic.

On the way back to Belfast, I had to find accommodation. I wasn't keen on another night in the hostel if I could avoid it. I finally found a nice place about 20 minutes before Belfast and checked in for the night. Unfortunately, New Year prices were inflated. Again, my Standard Bank credit card didn't work. My next task was to complete the Duolingo Diamond league for the week. To my amazement, I was still comfortably in the lead. I wasn't going to take any chances, though. I furiously worked for the last hour, winning the highest league by almost 1800 points. I was pleased to have been able to tick off this goal before year-end<sup>11</sup>.



Winning the Duolingo Diamond League.

The evening was spent on some correspondence and writing, as well as tying up loose ends for the next phase of my travels. I didn't quite get to bed as early as I'd hoped.

New Year's Day involved another special-event Parkrun. I would have loved to have done Queen's for another "Q", but it wasn't being held this day. I selected the Orangefield Parkrun—close enough to the airport to get me to my flight on time and small enough to ensure that I didn't end up in the triple digits again. I spoke to Laurens and Alet, who had just completed their New Year's Day Parkrun in South Africa.

I left the guesthouse later than planned, arriving at the Parkrun with just 15 minutes to spare. I tried to warm up, but the biting cold made it unpleasant. My accent was instantly placed by a woman in the crowd. Walter and Wendy had spent decades in Johannesburg. Walter was a serial Comrades finisher. The Parkrun was enjoyable, meandering through undulating green gardens on nice surfaces. Afterwards, there was a New Year's party in the clubhouse. My tummy was complaining, so I was grateful to use the ablution facilities before setting off for the airport.

The cashier at the filling station was amazed that I could be wearing shorts. I mentioned that I had already completed a 5 km Parkrun. He firmly ordered me out of there. I thought I had plenty of time, but security had other plans. My baggage was sent back twice, once because of the liquids not being in a plastic bag (they were) and once because of the paddle. Despite my pleas to the screener, each time my bag returned to the back of the queue. I was greatly relieved when a fellow passenger pointed out that my flight was delayed. I'd never before been so grateful for a flight delay.

Andrea<sup>12</sup> had advised that she would be flying circuits around arrival time. I sent her a message suggesting that we could fly directly after that session. As we were crossing the ocean, I was looking forward to her response.

<sup>10</sup> Radio callsign MI/ZS6EZ.

<sup>11</sup> Winning was just a fluke. The following week, the top two finishers each had over 15 000 points!

<sup>12</sup> <https://iomflying.school/>

## Isle of Man

My introduction to the island was not pleasant. I was unable to get connected to the phone network, so I couldn't call Andrea. The information desk explained that many British networks don't work, including mine. So much for the fancy SIM from Heathrow! I had no choice but to fork out another £ 10 for a local SIM. Yet another phone number to remember...

My sense of glee was not helped when I discovered that this fancy SIM did not have Internet access. Here I was on my way to Douglas with no map and no way to look for accommodation online. The bus driver was very helpful, dropping me off where there were "lots" of places to stay. It turns out that "lots" of places were closed, leaving only a few expensive places on the promenade. With the temperature not far above freezing, a stiff breeze and increasingly intense drizzle, I soon had to settle for the only option within range—grossly overpriced and with decidedly seedy undertones. Some girls in the foyer wore dresses that I initially mistook for belts.

The restaurant prices were likewise inflated, so I set off to a local Spar that I had noticed from the bus. The cashier was a displaced South African. The shelves were devoid of anything nutritious, so I just bought a few basics and retired to my room. I would be ready and checked out when I spoke to Andrea at 08:00 as agreed.

I had a pleasant surprise in the form of an hour-long chat with Hendrik and Bets. It's normally hard to catch them unless by arrangement, but they were taking a new year break.

Unfortunately, Andrea didn't bring good news. She had to get to the hospital to visit her husband. Instead, she would ask her colleague John to fly with me. He lives near the airport, so I wouldn't be able to catch a ride with him. John was helpful, but felt that the weather was not going to cooperate. We would check again the next day. The checkout clerk spoke Afrikaans. Her directions were a touch vague, but at least I set off in the right direction. I was soon on a bus for Ramsey. From the front seat on the upper deck, I had a grandstand seat to the tree branches we kept hitting.

Bob picked me up. He had just arrived back from some travels, so we made some shopping stops on the way home. We'd never met, but have many friends in common. He is also a keen traveller, having visited 93 countries and lived in three continents. We had a lot to talk about. Late afternoon, Bob took me to the lighthouse at the northern tip of the island. Our shopping was partly unsuccessful, as the ferry had not been running for several days and groceries were in short supply. Bob said that he hadn't seen the likes in 18 years on the island. I had assumed that the ferry would be reliable, and had planned to leave the island that way. I suddenly had to spend time finding flights to get out of there. Fortunately, I found a flight to London. I was astonished to learn that I had to pay more for my hand baggage than for my ticket. Clearly, Easyjet does not support transparency.

During the evening, John confirmed that the weather was likely to be favourable for some flying in the morning. After some early Greek practice, Bob dropped me off at the bus station. The bus was somewhat late. I managed to perch myself on the upper deck again. Visibility was better, and I enjoyed the scenery on the coastal road. The woman next to me took a phone call. The accent was unmistakable—yet another displaced South African. In Douglas, the bus overshot the bus station, and I had to walk back several blocks. At least the weather was less hostile than it had been.

John picked me up at the terminal. We chatted for a while before getting the aircraft out of the hangar and ready to go. Our flight was cut short by Air Traffic Control, apparently because of instrument calibration. It was a great disappointment for both of us. John deposited me at a local pub, where I could sit in comfort to wait for Doug and Karen to arrive.



John getting the SportStar ready.

On the way back to the airport, I stopped at the Manx Aviation and Military Museum. As could be expected, it was closed for the winter. Still, I enjoyed some of the outdoor exhibits and chatted to someone who was working on the cabin interior of an ATP from the 1990s. This particular example was the first off the production line and had been used by Manx Airlines, where John had done many flights in it. A slow restoration process was underway.

Once Doug and Karen had arrived, we drove home via the coastal road. It was definitely more scenic than the bus route. Bob provided us with running commentary. Once home, Bob rustled up a great meal while we were all engaged in the customary banter. As it grew late, Doug and Karen started feeling the effects of jet lag and went off to bed. Bob had erected some antennas during the day, so I had the opportunity to make some radio contacts throughout Europe and the eastern USA<sup>13</sup>. After more paperwork and more language lessons, I was off to bed. Unfortunately, I had to make the hard decision to abandon my attempt at the Channel Islands, as the ferry seemed doubtful in the light of recent cancellations due to weather and flights were really, really expensive. I decided to focus on Wales and southern England instead.

I woke up several minutes before the alarm clock. We enjoyed a great breakfast before setting off on a guided tour of the island. As a long-time resident, Bob made a great guide. He regaled us with stories about history and radio and his own personal involvement in the island. We drove a portion of the TT route. We enjoyed the House of Mannanin, a museum outlining the history of the island over the past 1500 years. I was fascinated—all of this history was completely new to me. The island has a heritage predating the Vikings, but played an important role in their kingdom. It wasn't all dry history; there was a continuous stream of banter among the group. We had transited the island all the way to the south, when we discovered that I had left my reading glasses near the museum. Bob graciously offered to make a detour to recover them before dropping me off at the airport for my flight back to London.



Bob photographing the two tourists at Tynwald, the world's longest-running parliament (over 1000 years!).

Mostly due to Bob's graces as a host, I felt much better about the island than I had just after arrival!

## Southern England and Wales

The ferry had not been running due to bad weather, so I caught an Easyjet flight to Gatwick. I was unimpressed when I had to spend over an hour looking for the rental car they had arranged for me. The rental car counters were all closed and I was completely unable to obtain help from Easyjet. I eventually found someone and headed out to Wales, arriving around 01:00. The accommodation I had booked had evaporated, so I spent an uncomfortable night in the parking lot. The temperature was just above freezing. Twice, I had to start the car and run the heater just to keep the temperature bearable.

<sup>13</sup> Radio callsign MD/ZS6EZ.

That morning, I visited the Cameron balloon factory in Bristol. David showed me around and we discussed various options of getting my balloon flying back on track. He invited me to the Icicles balloon meeting the next day. I was sorely tempted, but several other projects would have to be abandoned. It was a tough decision.

I found a flying school at Cardiff airport. They were unable to help me because of a runway closure. They pointed me to nearby St Athan. The receptionist there was most helpful, but because of the good weather, they were fully booked for the whole day. Opposite story, same result.

I discovered that a radio amateur and fellow DXFC participant lived not far away. The address was rather unspecific, but after some pointers from a neighbour, I spotted his antenna above the roof. Glyn<sup>14</sup> and Midge Jones received me warmly. We spent some time chatting about our travels and DX operations. Glyn had spent time in South Africa in the 1950s when he was in the merchant marine.



Glyn in his radio station (GWOANA photo).

He invited me to operate his station. Using his modest station, I made a string of contacts in Europe, before being surprised by a solitary call from California. Glyn showed me his mementos from his interaction with Elettra Marconi, the daughter of the radio pioneer. We sometimes forget how new this technology is! He also related his experiences at South Foreland lighthouse. I was able to tell him about some of the history with

Marconi and the recent archeological findings. Even I was amazed by the serendipity.

I reluctantly left for the drive to London for the next morning's Bushy Park Parkrun. After spending the night in Reading and being ripped off by the Travelodge, I completed the Parkrun before joining Gilliaume and Kato at their house for the day. I managed to fly out of Fair Oaks<sup>15</sup> just after lunch. Alan felt it unnecessary to intervene in my flying, giving me some closure after my experience in Serbia a month before. I returned home.



Alan and the Cherokee at Fair Oaks.

I had operated radio from England in the olden days, but was somewhat tempted to operate for the first time with a new-format callsign<sup>16</sup>. On the other hand, it was cold and wet and I didn't relish the thought of building an antenna. My friends coaxed me into it, so I strung my antenna across the garden and made a few contacts.

I was surprised to learn that they were in regular contact with Hendrik and Bets. Decades ago, Hendrik, Gilliaume and I had worked together at two different companies. I gave Hendrik and Bets a call on Skype. They were amazed to hear Gilliaume's and Kato's voices. We chatted for over an hour.

Because I had been invited to stay for the night, I had to extend the car rental. I spent well over an hour trying to contact Europcar. Their automated messages indicated that I had to work through

<sup>14</sup> Radio callsign GWOANA.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.flysynergy.com>

<sup>16</sup> M/ZS6EZ rather than the old ZS6EZ/G.

Easyjet. Needless to say, Easyjet was not helpful. I eventually had to decide to simply return the car late, hoping that there would be no repercussions.

I left early in the morning. The car indicated that I didn't have enough fuel to make it to the airport. Gilliaume told me where to get fuel. At the appointed spot on the highway, I didn't see a thing. I asked Waze for help, but there were no options within reach. I continued gingerly, conserving fuel as much as possible and hoping furiously that the fuel indication was conservative. It was. I refuelled on the airport before being lectured by the clerk about not notifying him of the late return. Despite my protest about spending so much time in vain, I had to pay a hefty fine. Thanks, Europcar.

## Looking back

Travelling through Gatwick, I checked the DXFC rankings. Doug had finally added Number 100 in Northern Ireland. After decades of trying, we have finally made it! It would have been nicer to have spent more time together, but we did have two days of great conversation with a great host.

I complete this story in Addis Ababa airport on my way home. Doug and Karen are in Northern Ireland, with the Channel Islands still to come to cement his standings above the century mark.

The trip required much impromptu problem solving. I had completely underestimated the extent to which this little island closes down for Christmas and New Year. Getting stuck in York for three days eventually resulted in having to abandon my Channel Island plans.

I anticipate a rough week or two ahead, having been absent for a fortnight. However, as I settle back into my routine, I will look back with great satisfaction to this trip. I've visited four new countries and made radio contacts from five. I've touched base with old friends. I've finally visited the Cameron balloon factory. I've flown in two new countries and with a new aircraft model. I've even managed to forget about my job for a day or two. But above all, I've experienced the magic of radio yet again.

Arthur C. Clarke said that technology at a sufficiently high level cannot be distinguished from magic. Radio hardly counts as high technology these days, but the magic has not disappeared. Whether making hundreds of contacts operating a superstation to commemorate a historical event or stringing a wire in a tree to plaintively call until I attracted attention, it really is all magic.