

Tony & Val Ashworth's Visit to the Isle of Man for Tynwald Day, July 5th 2010

Getting there and getting around

When we decided, at the last minute, to extend our European holiday and go to the Isle of Man for Tynwald Day celebrations on July 5th 2010, one of our major concerns was how to get there and how to get around once we arrived on the island.

Looking back, we should have made arrangements before we left Australia and taken advantage of cheaper airfares but we decided instead, apart from our accommodation booking at the Empress Hotel in Douglas, to organise our travel to the Isle of Man once we were settled in London and could perhaps better assess the situation from there. We had heard there were flights from Staverton in Gloucester and also from London City Airport. We thought we would wait until we saw relatives in Gloucester and our daughter in London to check how convenient these airports were.

We had booked the Danube and Rhine cruise through our travel agent: we had arranged to meet our daughter in Amsterdam and spend a few days there: we had booked our flights to Scotland and ordered a hire car to visit cousins and then drive to the Isle of Skye: we had made arrangements to hire a car to visit other relatives and friends in the UK. What we had not done was organise travel to the Isle of Man.

We realised, after all the other plans were in place, that if we stuck to our original itinerary, we would miss Tynwald Day by just a few days so paying a little extra for another week to take in the Isle of Man and Tynwald seemed justified.

It proved to be a good decision as our visit to the Isle of Man was one of the highlights of our trip. The welcome we received from the World Manx Association, formed as a result of an appeal by Manx poet T.E. Brown for a special welcome for homecomers, indeed made us feel very much at home. It also enabled us to be part of this thousand year old democratic celebration and to join in the Homecomers' activities. Many thanks to Carol Gray and the WMA for organising tickets for us to St John's Chapel, Tynwald and the Lieutenant-Governor's Garden Party as well as invitations to the WMA Annual Gathering and Dinner and Homecomers' Service.

We had been to the Isle of Man back in 2002 and driven a hire car over on the ferry from Heysham in Lancashire, little realising at the time that the Isle of Man is not part of the UK and that the small print in the hire contract restricted us to driving within the UK. This time we looked at other options. By far the quickest and most convenient means of transport was to fly from one of the many secondary airports in England to Ronaldsway but we were a little weary of the security checks, body searches, long queues, limited baggage allowances, and having to get to and from airports. Besides, prices were going up every time we checked flights online. One of us also had a crook knee which meant we were often last in the queue while passengers in frenzied work mode, with mobile phones and laptops attached, left us in their wake. There had to be a gentler, more unhurried way of getting around.

A bus to Liverpool to catch a ferry was the least expensive way to travel to the Isle of Man, we found. Our daughter, who could spare only a couple of days off work, chose that option and caught a bus from Victoria Station at 8.00 am. She filled in her waiting hours in Liverpool with a Beatles Magical Mystery Tour and spent the rest of the time in cafes, eventually catching an evening ferry which arrived in Douglas at 10.30 pm.

We decided, with due deference to bung knees, to take advantage of a train and ferry package deal which was not only fairly economical but would also allow us to experience various means of transport during our holiday in this part of the world. We booked a train to Heysham where the station was only a short walk to the ferry terminal. The day was written off to travel so we stocked up with books and magazines. We caught a bus from our daughter's place to the underground station, a tube to Euston, a train to Lancaster, another train to Heysham then the Ben-my-Chree to Douglas. We could sit back in leisurely comfort and watch the world, the wind farms and the white-capped Irish Sea go by.

We were staying at the Empress Hotel on the Promenade in Douglas so were able to take advantage of the available modes of transport which included the horse-drawn trams, buses and, of course, walking. The sun was shining and the sea air was clear although distances along the Promenade were a little deceptive and always seemed to take longer than anticipated. Nevertheless, a stroll along the Douglas Promenade, day or night, was always a rewarding experience. There were frequent stops to look at statues of such diverse Manx luminaries as Hall Caine and Norman Wisdom and be reminded by the Tower of Refuge of the foundation of the National Lifeboat Institute by Sir William Hillary.

Having renewed our acquaintance with train travel, the local railways held some appeal and in the two days before we joined the local activities, we took train rides north to Ramsey on the Electric Train and south to Port Erin on the Steam Train. Both took us through some very picturesque coastal countryside and provided many photo opportunities and a chance to chat to locals and tourists.

We met members of the WMA and other homecomers from around the world at their Annual Gathering and Dinner at the Masonic Hall, Douglas. Apart from the warm reception from members, we particularly appreciated the guest appearance of Andrew Williamson, three time winner of the prestigious Cleveland Medal at the annual Isle of Man Music Festival, who sang a variety of Manx songs, some of which we had included in our Celtic Connection Choir repertoire back home in Brisbane. Although the venue was within walking distance of our hotel, it was kind of members to offer us a lift home.

The Lieutenant-Governor's Garden Party was held at the Nunnery, just outside Douglas. I had recently given a lunch presentation to the Queensland Manx Society on Peter Heywood, the Manx mutineer of HMS Bounty fame, who was born at the Nunnery. I had to use an old drawing for my slide presentation so I took the opportunity to take a few photos in case I was called on to give an encore. It was a sunny but windy day with hats whizzing through the air like frisbees. Guests had the opportunity to do a bit of serious networking or simply take in the garden surroundings.

Manx Telecom had taken all my UK O2 phone credit because I was on roaming and I realised too late that I had no phone to ring for a taxi to get home. Many thanks to the Mayor and Mayoress of Douglas, Mr and Mrs Richard McNicholl, for kindly driving us back to the hotel.

The WMA arranged for a small bus to pick a few of us up and take us to the Homecomers' Service at Crosby Methodist Church where we enjoyed an excellent after-service supper and chat to local Manxies. Thanks to John Kennaugh and the Onchan Ladies Choir for the welcoming homecoming spirit of the service. Thanks also to Dave Karran who gave us a guided tour on the way home that took in the pre-12th Century

Maroun Old Church and the Bavarian-style farmhouse opposite, built by German internees in the 1940s. I promised to get back to him with information on how our Queensland Dalby township was named after the Isle of Man Dalby, but he's probably way ahead of me.

Information on special coaches to St John's on Tynwald Day was not forthcoming so we decided to take a taxi to make sure we were there on time. We were charged around 50% more for a taxi because it was a public holiday although the driver had the good grace to warn us beforehand. We discovered we need not have rushed as 'traa dy-liooar' - time enough - seems to apply even on this Day of Days. The return by bus to Douglas was more relaxed and economical.

The next day, sadly, it was time for us to leave the island and return to London. Again, we had a leisurely trip across the Irish Sea to Heysham where we caught a train back to Euston Station.

One could spend a lifetime on the island, I am sure, and not do full justice to all the Isle of Man has to offer. Our few days there gave us a demonstration of the warmth of the people and a sampling of the beauty of the landscape to make us want to return to Ellan Vannin at the next opportunity. But next time we will book a plane and hire a car a lot earlier so that we can get there and get around without too many headaches.