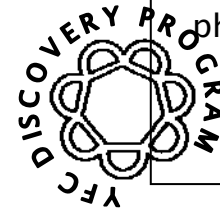




YFA TRAVEL DOCUMENT

Seeing the world with the YFC Discovery Programme

NAME: Amy Lee Kouwenberg
CLUB: Canadian 4H
DESTINATION: UK
TYPE OF TRIP: Homestay
DURATION: 4 weeks
DATES OF TRAVEL: Was in Staffordshire in July 2003



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DESCRIPTION OF TRIP:

And thus begins a new adventure.... Little did I know on June 1, 2003, when wrote this opening line of my travel journal, what a fitting description it would be of my 4H/Young Farmers UK Exchange. An adventure is most definitely what my trip to the United Kingdom has been. Each stop on my tour from Shropshire, to Clwyd, to Warwickshire, to Staffordshire brought new experiences and exciting opportunities. I did not have specific expectations before embarking on my journey, but as can be seen from the descriptions below, my trip far exceeded anything I could have imagined.

The first stop of my trip deposited me, fresh off the airplane from Toronto, in Stoneleigh, Warwickshire, where I was warmly greeted by the National Young Farmers Club (YFC) executive. At this time, my fellow delegates from Canada and I met the other international YFC delegates also doing exchanges in England and Wales. It was especially interesting to speak with the exchangees from Kenya and Zambia, as their farming methods differ most greatly from those in Canada. Meeting the international delegates also allowed me to practice my French speaking skills, as the girl representing Switzerland had difficulty speaking English upon arrival. It was quite handy that I was able to translate (in my less than perfect French) instructions and other important information. I recently had the uneasy experience being in a country where I was only semi functional in the widely spoken language, so it felt good to be able to help someone else out of this uncomfortable situation. After attending a few meetings and getting more acquainted with the delegates and YFC members, the time quickly arrived where each of us had to strike out to our respective parts of the United Kingdom.

I was driven by the county chairman of Shropshire county to the farm of Amy Thexton and her family, which is located near the town of Sheriffhales. I settled into the Thexton family very well, finding that they shared my interest in hiking and nature. I ended up buying a book about the Shropshire hills by the end of my stay in the county because I had been taken to climb and explore almost the entire range during my stay!! I especially enjoyed The Wrekin and the Cardingmill Valley on which my semi-reckless rock hopping earned me the nickname "Mountain Goat".

Besides some wonderful views of Shropshire, the Thexton family also treated me to a first class education in dairying. I helped with milking on the Thexton farm, job shadowed a relief milker, and did an early morning milking at the farm down the road from where I was staying. Each of the farms on which I milked had different systems and methods (e.g. two of the farms milked in a common pit parlor, while the other used a less common abreast parlor) The relief milker, Marie, was especially helpful in teaching me correct and safe milking procedures. These skills will be very useful when my parents begin milking cows on our farm in the near future.

My time with the Thexton also included some exploration of the rich local history including a trips to Ironbridge, which is considered to be the cradle of the industrial revolution, and Stratford upon Avon, the birthplace of Shakespeare. As well, we managed to squeeze in tours of the Much Wenlock Priory, Lilleshall Abbey, the town of Chester, Harper Adams University, and Shrewsbury Market. As the hopeless romantic that I am, the one historical activity in which I became most caught up was my walk through the caves and forested hills of Hawkstone Historic Park and Follies. Besides breath-taking lookouts, the immense park includes a labyrinth of caves said to have been used by King Arthur in days past, and in which Sir Owen is said to have been nursed back to health (after slaying two giants) by the Lady of the White Rock.

After a sad good bye to the Thextons, I hopped across the county to the home of Lisa Howells and Pete Haynes. We kicked off our busy week with a walk around Lisa's 800 acre hill farm, which contains the highest point in Shropshire. As we hiked along, she taught me all about the farming of hill sheep, a farming method that was completely new to me. It was fascinating to learn about the role of sheepdogs and horses in handling the flocks, and how these animals are trained to work.

During the week, I also had another wonderful learning opportunity, this time on a swine farm. It was incredibly interesting for me to visit a pig farm that is not my own because I do not ever get the chance when I am home because of disease control regulations. The farm I visited was especially fascinating due to the fact that it is an outdoor unit, something that is very rarely seen in Canada. I expected to spend the day watching the farmer go about his chores, but I was definitely mistaken!! In the course of the day, I learned all about the different pros and cons of outdoor pig farming, was taught to perform A.I. (Artificial Insemination) on sows, and learned to test sows for pregnancy using an audio ultra sound device. The A.I. training was especially useful since we are just beginning this process on my parents' farm in Nova Scotia. I serviced about 12 sows, but have not heard back yet if any of them were successfully bred!!

To round out my group of farm tours, I also visited a Hereford farm belonging to the family of two Young Farmers in the area. After touring the farm, I was able to put my 4 H skills to work by helping with the washing and preparation of a string of show cattle. Interestingly enough, I saw the same cattle entering the show ring at the Royal Show later in my trip, and I was able to find the Timmis family to say a quick "hello".

Besides farm tours, my week was also filled with many events in which I was able to meet Young Farmers Club members. I helped to build a float for a local parade under the ambitious direction of an unique YFC member, went to several YFC meetings, and attended the Three Counties Exhibition, which included a YFC stock judging competition with which Lisa was involved.

My time with Lisa and Pete also allowed me to explore some of the Shropshire history for which I ran out of time while with the Thextons. We spent a very interesting day at the Blists Hill Museum, a restored Victorian town complete with actors in period clothing, and also explored the history of the Shropshire hills at the Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre.

My time with Lisa and Pete flew by too quickly, and soon it was time for me to make a big move. A move all the way to Clwyd and Eryry counties in North Wales, where I was introduced to sheep, mountains, and WELSH. What an experience it was to hear a language that has absolutely no resemblance to any spoken tongue I had ever heard. . . except, perhaps, the elvish language in Lord of the Rings!! I actually happened to be reading the Lord of the Rings series during my trip, and I could not help drawing comparisons between my surroundings in Wales to Tolkien's descriptions. At some points, it was as if the book was being illustrated before my eyes!! The wonderful nature and scenery of Wales was definitely something of which I took full advantage. One of the highlights of my trip was reaching the summit of Mount Snowdon, which, at 1084 metres, is the tallest mountain in England and Wales. To prepare myself for this climb I first explored some smaller hills in the area, such as Moel Fameau, which offered spectacular views of the countryside. In my travels around the countryside, I also visited a local waterfall called Swallow Falls, looked at the historic gravestone of a dog accidentally killed by his master, and toured many hill farms belonging to YFC members in the area. I never quite got used to the extreme inclines on which the Welsh are able to drive farm machinery, but I did manage to do a bit of hill driving of my own when I drove a Land Rover in the field of one of the YFC members. It was quite odd to be on the right side of the vehicle and to have to shift with my left hand, but I had a good instructor to help me out.

All of the families with whom I stayed: the Roberts family, the Rudman family, and the Jones family offered the many different types of activities described above, making for a great variety. I did everything from touring a water buffalo farm near Denbigh, to visiting a Sea Zoo on the Island of Anglesey, to touring an electric power station located inside one of the mountains in Snowdonia National Park, to attending a concert featuring Welsh rock bands (at which I saw the brother of the guy who runs around in his underwear in the movie Notting Hill; talk about a brush with Hollywood!), to visiting a huge castle in Caveranan, to participating in a Welly Wanging (boot throwing) contest, to touring a yoghurt factory near Groes, to crossing the Irish Sea and visiting Dublin, Ireland, to making a helicopter out of a wheelbarrow. If that wasn't enough, to feel like a true Welsh Young Farmer, I also sheared my first sheep and learned the proper way to wrap wool. Both of these things I learned at a day long sheep shearing

clinic at which I was taught all about the equipment and techniques involved in efficient and safe shearing and wool handling.

As can well be imagined, I was getting a bit on the weary side when my two weeks in Wales drew to a close, but I was also very excited to have made good use of my time while in the beautiful country. Although I was very reluctant to leave my families in Wales, I was also excited to get reacquainted with the other YFC International Exchange delegates upon arriving in Warwickshire, England. It was so interesting to catch up with the delegates I had met previously, and to become acquainted with the new Austrian and Australian delegates who had joined our group. We started our week together with a couple of days touring the Royal Show, which offered countless hours of exhibits and activities. I managed to get myself into everything from watching a team of backhoes doing a choreographed dance to the compositions of Andrew Lloyd Webber, to watching a fence erecting competition, to participating in a ballroom dancing workshop with Chad (the Australian delegate)!!

Besides the Royal, our week was packed with all sorts of other activities as well. As a group we met a huge number of YFC members through things like playing Rounders (a game that everyone says is like baseball. . .but actually is totally different aside from the bat and ball part!!), introducing England to the wonders and excitement of Canada Day (complete with Canada stickers, temporary tattoos, pins, and flags), taking a trip to London to visit the major sites (although my favorite part was our trip to the London Aquarium), and (one of the highlights of my exchange) attending the Royal Shakespeare Company's Swan Theatre in Stratford upon Avon!! What was left of the week was devoted to getting to know our hosts, Susan Dancer and Racheal Long, and touring the farms run by their families.

It was incredibly difficult having to leave all the friends I made in Warwickshire, especially the Dancer and Long families who had really gone out of their way to make sure that everyone in our group felt at home. However, my spirits were lifted again when I took a tour (complete with free sample!) of the original Cadbury Chocolate Factory in Bourneville on the way to the home of Andrew, Jane, Amy, Molly, and Joseph Brookes in Staffordshire. Along with the county organizer, Margaret Bennett, the Brookes family made my last week in the United Kingdom truly memorable. As if feeling like a character in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory wasn't cool enough, I started my week by riding the absurdly frightening roller coasters at Alton Towers Amusement Park!! Throughout the week, I also had many other new experiences such as visiting an ice cream factory, spending a morning helping with surgeries in a small animal veterinary clinic, helping to build a raft for a local raft race, and visiting a bird sanctuary. Interacting with the veterinary surgeons was particularly interesting for me, since vet surgery is a potential career choice for me.

Although I enjoyed all my activities, my time in Staffordshire was made most enjoyable through my interaction with the Brookes family. Being involved with chores such as milking and picking black currants, and attending special events like a school field day allowed me really to get to know everyone in the family. Getting along so well with the Brookes ended my time in Britain on a very positive note. However, this, in combination of all my wonderful experiences while in the U.K., made it very difficult for me to leave. Despite my difficulty in accepting the fact that my trip was ending, my time to leave inevitably arrived. I spent my last night back with the Long family in Warwickshire, and then took an early morning bus to London Heathrow Airport. Before long, I was back in Nova Scotia scraping out a pig pen and happily recalling my wonderful memories of the previous six weeks. When I arrived home from my university semester in Paris just a few weeks before leaving for my U.K. trip, I was convinced that I would never find an experience that would ever remotely compare to Paris. . . luckily, I was proven wrong.

I sincerely thank everyone involved in making this United Kingdom 4 H/Young Farmers Exchange possible for me, especially the Garfield Weston Foundation, the Canadian 4 H Council, and the Nova Scotia 4 H Council. I can honestly say that your time and funding have truly made a difference in my life, and I hope that this once in a lifetime opportunity will continue to be available for other 4 H members to enjoy.

Yours in 4 H,

Amy Lee Kouwenberg,

2003 U.K. Young Farmers/ 4 H Exchange Delegate, Pugwash, Nova Scotia.