

The Best Tour Guide Ever

Two soldiers were standing at attention in their bright red uniforms and tall, black, fuzzy hats, as we stood peering through the fence. We had our umbrellas in hand in case a sudden spring shower should start up, but the sky was clear blue on that warm, sunny day.

I first noticed him stroll up to our friend's seventeen-year-old daughter and begin talking to her. He was a short, elderly man with white hair, a blue raincoat, and a black umbrella. In a soft, crisp accent, he told her that she was standing in the wrong location to see all the activities that were about to take place.

This was our first visit to Buckingham Palace and we had no idea what to expect. Every few minutes, I noticed the gentleman in the blue raincoat would walk around through the crowd and speak softly to another group of people. But, he would always come back to us.

He told us that the building we were looking at -- Buckingham Palace -- was not where the Queen lived. Her actual residence was some distance behind it. And, the Queen only came out onto the balcony, once a year, to address the people or for weddings and funerals. He said Buckingham Palace was built for Queen Victoria, the Queen's grandmother. It was used for her wedding and reception and was seldom used by the royalty. The small, round islands outside the fences of the palace with statues of royalty fashioned on top, were built to look like wedding cakes.

I wondered why the guards had to stand at attention in front of the palace if it was seldom used for royalty. I later read in a booklet that "Buckingham Palace is used to host occasional state functions."

Instead of standing right in front of the fence at Buckingham Palace, our guide suggested a better place was to go to the edge of the curb, close to the street. He told us to turn our backs to the guards behind the fence and face the street. This seemed very strange, but reluctantly we did as he directed.

Throughout the morning our private guide told us the exact times for each occurrence and where each event would take place. He directed us where to stand at the exact time, and precisely when to move to another area.

We couldn't help but notice his nearly toothless smile and sparkling blue eyes as one story after another poured out of him. Just when we thought he was through expounding, we'd feel a tap on the shoulder and he'd tell another interesting story. We weren't sure if his stories were factual, but as we stood wondering, why on earth we had moved from our choice spot, at the direction of a total stranger, a mounted police officer bent down, shook the gentleman's hand, and called to him, "James, how are doing?"

He told us that all the horses for the Queen's Guard were Irish Blacks. Two years of training were required for the position of Guard and had to be passed down from father to son. This tradition has been going on since the year 1615.

He explained that there were four different colored uniforms that represented the four areas England ruled over -- Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Britain. All four had different combinations of red and blue, and were identified by their specific number of buttons, plumes, and types of saddle.

At the sound of the flutes and drums, we looked in the direction he had indicated, and we could see the majestic Irish blacks coming our way, pacing down the mall from St. James Palace to Buckingham Palace, with the red and blue jackets clearly visible in the distance. The wide street and long vistas next to beautiful St James Park, with its flower beds bursting in color and weeping willow trees, was a perfect setting for such a parade. Our delightful new friend told us, that the band members had to be able to play five different instruments and remain in the band for 25 years.

Our new friend, James, also informed us that two guards would stand at attention for exactly one hour in front of Buckingham palace. Just as he said that, precisely at 25 minutes after 11 am, they stood without moving until one hour had passed.

Occasionally, we would feel a light tap on our shoulder, as he directed young children to stand in front of us, so they too could have a better view. He not only directed us to the next event, "The real changing of the guard," as he called it, but walked with us the half block across and down the street, necessary to stand in just the right place. He made sure we again had the very best view of the guardsmen marching back to their barracks.

True to his word, within a few minutes the band again came marching around the corner, toward us. If they hadn't taken a sharp right at the corner where we

were standing, they would have marched into us. I've always heard of ring-side seats, but this was even better. What impressed me most was this man's kindness, gentleness, hospitality and enthusiasm.

In a short time, we had changed our mind about him from doubting, to being in awe, that he could direct us so precisely. We were no longer surprised to learn that he had been a Queen's Guardsman for 27 years, but it did surprise us to learn he was 93 years old.

(Written by Jeannette Vardiman for my grandchildren)