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On a Bench in Edinburgh

Jakob Thorup Thomsen

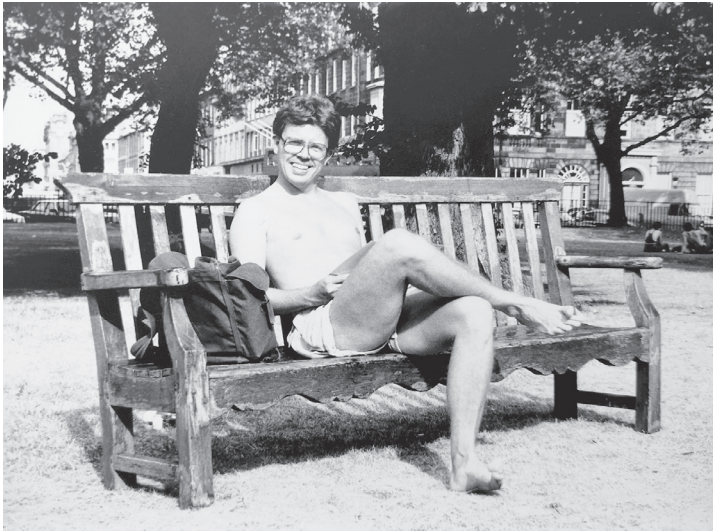


Photo: Jakob Thorup Thomsen

An old photograph shows Bjarne sitting on a bench in Edinburgh's Charlotte Square, wearing a pair of shorts and bare-chested in the sunshine. He's examining a map of the city and smiling up at the photographer.

This was Bjarne's first visit to Edinburgh. His accommodation was the relatively pleasant youth hostel in the New Town, not far from where that photograph was taken. At this moment in time, young Bjarne had no inkling that he was

visiting the city where he would spend most of his working life.

Just a few years later, Bjarne took a big leap and moved to the UK for work. To begin with, this was just for a single year in Newcastle. Later, he moved to Edinburgh, and, as I'm sure readers know, he remained in Scotland until retirement – albeit while retaining strong ties to Scandinavia.

The author of the piece you are reading just so happens to be Bjarne's slightly younger brother. I may not have been there when Bjarne began his British career, but I was most certainly present when Bjarne met the Brits for the first time. Over the course of two summers in the early 1980s, we headed off to the UK on our holidays and it was on one of these tours up and down the country that Bjarne and I happened upon verdant Charlotte Square.

Armed with Britrail passes, we and our big rucksacks had unlimited access to the full extent of British Rail's network. While we were at liberty to travel anywhere we liked, our journeys tended to draw us away from the traditional centres and towards the peripheries – with a particular emphasis on Scotland. Admittedly, I believe we may have spent a day or two in London as well... This trajectory allowed us to observe that not only is John O'Groats the northernmost point in the mainland British Isles, but it is also one of the most boring places we could ever conceive of. We were rather more excited about our trips along the West Highland Line to Mallaig and Oban. It was fantastic to walk along the harbour front in Oban and experience the incredible atmosphere amongst the retired holidaymakers in the town's hotels. Every evening, there was the distant sound of bagpipes, and it seemed as if the place hadn't changed in decades.

Our travels took us to the Hebrides and to places that were most definitely not tourist hotspots. Lochmaddy on North Uist might not be the kind of place that would land a spot on the

front page of the tourist guidebooks, but as I mentioned, we were drawn to the peripheries of these islands. An amazing highlight was the Isle of Raasay. The island youth hostel, long since closed down, was located up a narrow lane a couple of miles from the pier and had incredible views across the water to Skye. The men's dormitory was housed in a former sheepfold behind the main building, and one day we climbed to the highest point on Raasay – the summit of Dun Caan. Hardly a mountain peak of international renown, but shaped by a volcano and most definitely exotic for two lads from flat Denmark.



Photo by Jakob Thorup Thomsen

I am in no doubt whatsoever that the British made a very positive impression on both Bjarne and me. From a Scandinavian point of view, they were more open, welcoming, and talkative than we were used to back home. That positive impression must have played its part when Bjarne chose to work so far from home. It was a big decision to work in the UK – don't forget that at the time, the cities of Edinburgh and Newcastle seemed much further away from Denmark than they do nowadays. This was before globalisation. There was no internet or email, so staying in touch with family and friends back home was confined to letters – phone calls were generally too expensive. The same was true of plane tickets, so the preferred route to Britain was by boat on the Esbjerg–Harwich sailing, which took twenty hours.

Britain was truly fascinating to two young Danes. It was at once modern and old-fashioned. The country was more densely populated, meaning there were far more people in the streets of the towns and cities than we would ever see in Denmark. It was also more multicultural than Denmark, and the trains ran faster – at least on the main lines. The selection of beers (not to mention crisps) was greater, but in contrast we were baffled by the existence of just two types of bread in the shops – white and brown – and the fact that filter coffee was a posh new concept for the British. Milk in glass bottles with a thick layer of cream on top was something we had said goodbye to in Denmark a couple of decades earlier, but the fatty British milk tasted incredible on a bowl of muesli. Many of the homes, and most definitely the youth hostels we visited, were cold and draughty (at least to Scandinavians). Indeed, they still are.

Nevertheless, the British made a highly positive impression on the two of us. This certainly played a role when Bjarne accepted the offer to teach Scandinavian languages and literature in the UK. To begin with, he could hardly have planned to

spend his entire career doing so, but I am convinced that it was a good decision, and it has given him an exciting and stimulating working life in an environment in which he thrived. It was also where he met Gunilla – in Scandinavian Studies – leading to another good decision when he married her.

Now Bjarne has departed from his role in Scandinavian Studies and has more flexibility to visit Denmark and Sweden and spend time with his family and friends. Of course, Bjarne and Gunilla are eager to keep in touch with their Scottish friends while pursuing their passion for walking in the nation's great outdoors. To my knowledge, Bjarne has never set foot on the Isle of Raasay since our visit there in the 1980s, but perhaps there may yet be an opportunity to climb Dun Caan again.