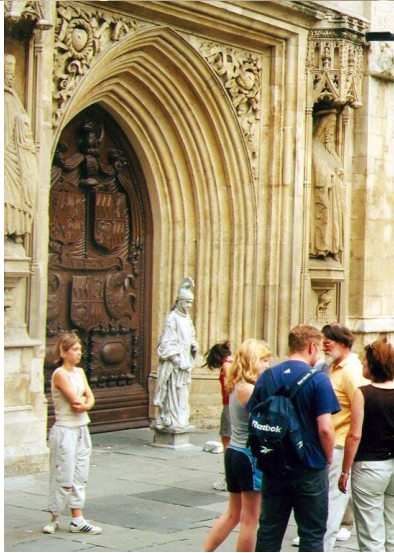


2003 England Letter



Michael Pierre de Villiers

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Title page: Battle and the abbey gate, Battersea Bridge, Bath Cathedral, Wells Abbott's Palace, War and Peace show at Beltring Hop Farm and Bodiam Castle.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Pierre de Villiers was born in Durban, South Africa. He was trained to World Meteorological Organization class one meteorologist and multi-discipline weather forecaster in the South African Weather Service where he reached the rank of Director. He served on a weather ship in the South Atlantic. He served on World Meteorological Organization expert teams and was World Meteorological Organization rapporteur for the Africa region. He was also a commercial pilot and flying instructor. More recently he was a weather forecaster in the United Arab Emirates, then in England. Now retired.

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2026-08-17

2003 England letter

Michael Pierre de Villiers

This is an edited copy of a letter (with additional photographs) sent from Abu Dhabi to my mother in South Africa on the 6th September 2003. Personal text and names have been censored to preserve privacy. Unfortunately, no reference sources were saved with the letter. Suitable recent references have been added in a bibliography. Situations mentioned reflect those of the time.

Well, we (my wife and I) went to England on the 2nd July 2003 to the 26th. Wonderful time. It is always good to go there and instantly feel at home.



In the Abu Dhabi departure hall.

Checking in at Abu Dhabi International Airport for our Royal Brunei flight was a bit chaotic and they were not really that busy. No check-in counter was open when we arrived, although it should have been, considering that one is asked to check in two hours before departure time. Knowing the layout of the aircraft, I asked for 2 seats in a certain part of the aircraft and we were given seats two rows from the back, which is what we did not want, while friends who checked in after us got seats nearer to where I wanted to be. In future I think I'll ask to be at the back and

then we should get the seats we want. The check-in clerk also appeared to be under the misguided impression that I worked for the airline the way I was being told to turn the two pieces of luggage this way and that.

Announcements in the departure hall were impossible to hear and they changed the departure gate, which I did not notice. Fortunately, we more than somewhat taken aback to notice a total lack of pale faces and lots of Asian faces in long shirts at the departure area. As we were going to the UK and not to Asia this was somewhat disconcerting. We then found out that our departure gate had been changed from 6 to 3 and these people were going to Sri Lanka and may they be happy there.

Brunei is a staunch Muslim country so no booze is served on their aircraft. However, you can take your own on board. We went equipped with a bottle opener, a small bottle of dry white wine for wife and two whiskey tots for myself to drink with our meal. We had the same stock for the return flight.

The Royal Brunei flight to and from the UK was very pleasant. The cabin crews from Brunei, which is on the same island as Borneo, were very efficient and attentive. No there were no wild men from Borneo on the flight that we knew of. A measure of the cabin crew efficiency was that the toilets remained clean for the entire trip. Anyone who has travelled long distance will know that this is almost unheard of. Check in at Heathrow terminal 3, which was far busier than at Abu Dhabi, was much more efficient. The difference probably being that at London the staff were airline employees, while at Abu Dhabi ground services are contracted out.

Son-in-law and daughter-in-law with baby met us at the airport. They took us south in their motor car to their house where they were presented with our standard gift of a Mosque clock as well as a Shisha. The other relatives received their gifts later. We had a most enjoyable after dinner evening sitting on the floor passing the Shisha pipe around with wine and beer.



The view from the Barn and stable of Horsmonden's St Margaret Church and ex-oast house (used for drying hops used in the brewing of beer).

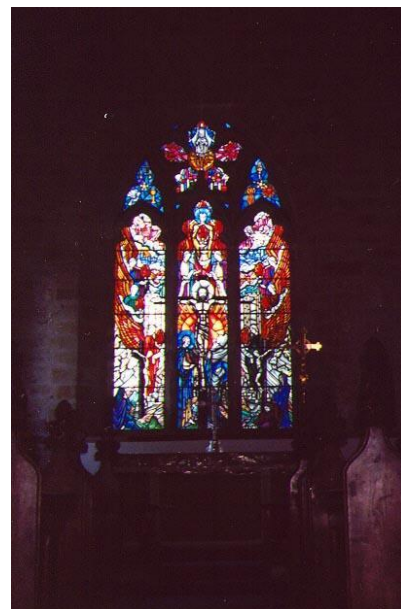
We were based in the village of Horsmonden in Kent, a very pretty little place with two pubs on the common and others nearby. We stayed with son-in-law and family in their double story semi-detached house and on two occasions in sister-in-law's stable. No, she really is a gracious host. She lives in a converted stable next to her friend, who lives in a converted barn and who owns the barn and the stable nearby. Both are protected structures, which means that externally the buildings must be historically

preserved, even if not internally preserved. The friend has a pet chicken she has named Effie, who tends to believe she (the chicken) is a human being. The owner invited us and others to a barbeque, at which I had to cook the steaks. She was not impressed when I asked for help to hold the chicken down on the Weber while I got the lid on.



St. Margaret's Church, Horsmonden.

Visited the attractive Horsmonden St. Margaret's Church, which also has some very good stained-glass windows. Building started in 1317 with further additions later in the century, which were probably interrupted by the Black Death during 1348-1349. Post French Norman influence can be found in the names of the early builders and sponsors. Initiator of the church building was the second parish rector Henry de Grofhurst. Owners of the Manor of Horsmonden were the de Rokesle family. Agnes de Rokesle married Sir Thomas de Poynings.

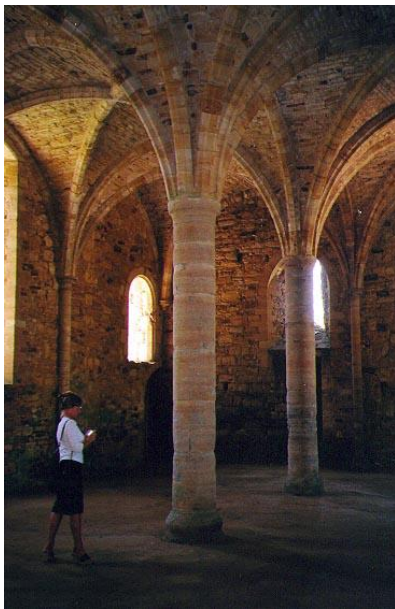


In 1944, a flying bomb fell close to the north-eastern part of the church, which not only blew out the stained-glass windows on the north and east sides of the church, dating back to the late 19th century, but also the candles (and holders) inside. These were replaced in 1946 and 1948, as well as the stained-glass windows. The stained-glass photograph at the end of the south aisle is of Christ on the cross and his resurrection and dates from the 19th century.



Battle Abbey.

Wife and I were very fortunate to have the use of Warren's car while he was at work in London. So we got to do some interesting country trips. On one of them we went down to Battle, nearly 7 miles from the coastal town of Hastings in Sussex. Battle is the village at the scene of the battle of Senlæ, or Hastings 1066 and all that. While Hastings is not at the scene of the battle, but it is still called the Battle of Hastings.



Roof and wall thickness. Notice the bank card for scale.



We did a tour of the battle site and the remains of the Abbey founded by William the Conqueror to atone for all the deaths the Norman invaders caused. Building began the year following the battle, but it was not completed until the reign of his son, William Rufus who reigned from 1087 to 1100. To support the massive structure the walls are about 2½ feet thick (0.75 metre).

The monastery buildings form a large quadrangle, with the high altar of the church on the spot where King Harold fell.

As in fell dead and not fell over his feet 'cause he was clumsy. The Abbey holds the famous Roll of Battle Abbey. This is a list of all those who accompanied William from Normandy. It became very honourable to be descended from one of these Norman families and naughty, dishonourable, unauthentic later additions have been made.

An interesting feature of the Abbey was the Reredorter. Sounds like a medieval enema. Have you been re-redortered? No, mine took the first time thank you. To quote from the plaque on the remains of a wall, this was a latrine built in the mid 13th century. Monks had direct access to it from the dormitory. A paved main drain discharged down the valley and large arches gave easy access for cleaning. Very considerate for sure. As far as I can gather, they squatted over the trench and the rest was up to gravity. Maybe this is where the name long drop latrine came

from. Certainly splash back was not a problem. The outside public loo's, next to the car park, are not worth writing home about. Probably because they have a Reredorter.



The ice house on top and inside the ice hole. No, ICE hole.

More interesting was the ice house. This was originally a domed structure that was later covered with turf and had three doors to keep warm air out. Inside is a huge and deep conical well-like chamber. Ice from a nearby winter frozen lake was stacked in the chamber, interspersed with straw for insulation. Ice was then used when necessary to keep food cold during summer. Even on a hot summer's day, such as when we were there, with no ice inside, the chamber was chilly. I get the impression that it was highly effective and probably provided ice for the entire summer. After a hard day on the battlefield, it is great to put one's feet up and relax with a G and T and lots of ice.



The pond at the Vine pub, Goudhurst.

On the way back we stopped at the Vine pub and restaurant at Goudhurst, close to Horsmonden, for lunch. I had a delicious sausage, onion and tomato sauce baguette with lots of chips, while my wife had a Tuna salad. I also had a half pint of beer. Wife had a glass of water. She was driving. The toilet was OK. My range and endurance not being the best. On our travels around England, I became an authority on the public toilets. We also had far too many good meals and drinks in pubs in the country villages and in London.

Later during the holiday, on a trip to Tenterden with sister-in-law, we had lunch at another pub in Goudhurst with son-in-law and family. Goudhurst is situated on a ridge and its claim to fame, as I understand it, is that it has the highest church tower in the region and it was used as an observation post during the 2nd world war and damaged. They probably observed the flying bombs passing and going down near the Horsmonden church and blowing out the windows and candles.

The day after we arrived, I went up to "Lunnon" by train from nearby Paddock Wood station to spend the day while the others had other plans. Went from Charing Cross on the Northern Line to Hendon. It was an overcast drizzly day and a fair walk to the RAF Hendon Museum. On the way there I stopped at the Police College to ask how much further it was to the museum, only to be told it was next door. The police lass probably wondered how one could miss an airport-sized museum. I was last there in the early 1970's, so I don't feel that stupid. However,

before looking at anything at the museum I had to ask the guy at the reception the shortest way to the little room. It was very clean and well appointed.

At no cost the museum is very good value for money and a good way to spend a rainy day, or any day in fact. I especially enjoyed walking through the Sunderland flying boat. It really was big for its time and bristled with guns and depth charges. No wonder enemy aircraft generally gave it a wide berth.

From there I went back to central London and the South African pub near Covent Garden, a just in time emergency stop, caused by the large coke I drank at Hendon. Londoners apparently do not have to go to the toilet, because they are very few and far between. Then it was back to Charing Cross station to catch a train back to Paddock Wood by 7 pm. The reason being that other son-in-law was going to be on the train and he was providing my lift from Paddock Wood to Horsmonden.

Later in the week wife and I went back to London to spend the day traipsing around and about



The Thames Foot Tunnel at Greenwich.

to places such as Foils, the bookstore and Hamleys, the toy store. We also went out to the Maritime Museum on the automated, driver less docklands railway, which is maintained by Serco. While at Greenwich we had a pub lunch just around the corner from the Cutty Sark in a dry-dock. We also went to the Museum to see if I could interest their in-house publishers in co-publishing my book on sailing shipwrecks with the publishers in Durban. No joy I am afraid. After returning to the UAE I got an e-mail saying thanks, but no thanks. At the end of the day, we met the other son-in-law after work in Carnaby Street for a drink and then home via Paddock Wood.



Routemaster No19 on Battersea Bridge and Chelsea house boats.

On another much later trip to London, wife and daughter-in-law went to London to spend the day at a health spa. I pottered around London again and caught one of London's old red double-decker buses out to the Battersea Bridge. From there I walked along Kings Road before deviating to the Army Museum and then walked past the Royal Chelsea Hospital, with its Chelsea pensioners sitting outside in the sun and others playing croquet. Also saw where Eric Clapton apparently lives when he comes to London. In Kings Road, not the Royal Chelsea Hospital.

We, along with sister-in-law (in her car) then went to stay in Beckington, near Bath, in a house owned by her friend's daughter.



Pausing at Stonehenge.

We stopped at the tourist trap known as Stonehenge just long enough to take a photograph and for me to visit the loo. Its purpose in being built is pure speculation. Much is made of the sun rising over a specific stone on the summer solstice longest day of the year and setting on the winter solstice shortest day. It this now in our time, or has it been calculated to be valid approximately 4500 years ago? The Earth's processional rotational axis is an approximate 26000 years cycle.

That means the positions of celestial bodies have changed. The solstice relationship at Stonehenge will have changed by about 12%. Is this a significant change?

Beckington village is named after Bekynton, Bishop of Wells from 1443 - 1465. Our host (sister-in-law's friend's daughter) runs a B and B that is across the road from the local pub. Of course we had lunch there. At one time the house was connected to the pub by a covered arch. I suspect that long ago it formed the entrance to a coach yard behind the Inn.



View of the pub from our loft accommodation. One had to mind bumping one's head.

We did the rounds of Bath, simply because we had a hilarious time trying to find Waitrose Supermarket to buy groceries for Debbie. At times we followed open tour busses hoping to hear where we were from the guides commentary. We lost count of the number of times we passed a period-dressed lass in front of Jane Austin's house, cathedral and Roman bath.

We did a day trip to Wells (the smallest city in England, because it has a cathedral), Wookey Hole Caves and Cheddar Gorge. Wells is famous for its famous cathedral with a famous clock.

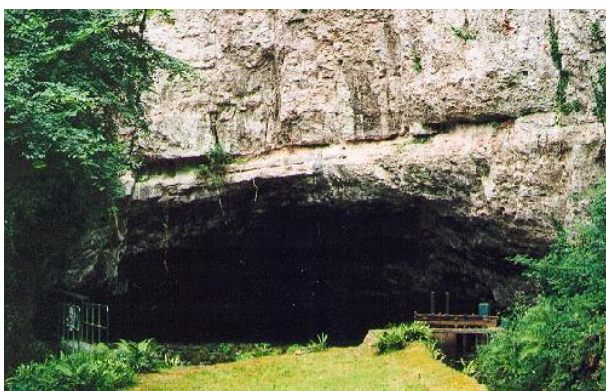
Building of the famous Gothic style cathedral began in 1179-1180 and took about 300 years to complete. It looks a lot like Notre-Dame, simply because that is also a Gothic style cathedral. The architect of the Wells cathedral is unknown, because back in those days it was considered a sin to need to get credit for your work and anyway, after 300 years of building, I doubt if the builders even remembered his name. The Wells cathedral is indeed massive and impressive. So big that they had a problem with the weight of the central tower that began to crack in 1313



Wells Cathedral.



The clock.



Wookey Hole Caves entrance.

Gorge. The village was quaint and very touristy, so we did not stop long. The gorge was impressive.

Via tall hedgerow bordered narrow back roads, we went to Mells for a late afternoon pint at the very old and quaint Talbot Inn. We had to enter the Inn through a small door open in the

due to additional building work. Other sources say the tower began to crack due to an earthquake. An earthquake in England!? I bet the builders would have liked to consult the architect then. Anyway, whatever the reason, the problem was cured by building a strange looking scissor arch inside the tower. The scissor arch helps to support the tower by redistributing the load toward the ground.

When the famous cathedral was completed in the 1430's, the west front had the most figurative statues in the western world, which helped it to become even more famous. The statues reflect the biblical history of the world and depict Christ, angels, Apostles, Saints, Bishops, Knights and Kings.

The famous clock is remarkable because it has been working since the 1390 and is the oldest clock face in existence. It is also unique because it has its original medieval face, which depicts a pre-Copernican universe with the earth at the centre. Every quarter of an hour, for 600 years, a mechanical Quarter Jack (looks like a little man to me) bangs the quarter hour with his heels and 4 jousting knights rush round above the clock and every quarter of an hour, for over 600 years, the same knight gets knocked back in his saddle.

Then it was on to the Wookey Hole Caves. But first we had to stop at the nearby pub for lunch. Very tasty food and big serving, but the décor of the pub was very confusing. It looked like a cross between a witch's grotto and a new age lunatic fringe religious gathering place. The caves are not a patch on the Sudwala caves in Mpumalanga, South Africa. It has the best toilets of the UK visit. A nearby paper mill that dated from 1610 used the water from the river flowing from the caves. After this is was off to Cheddar



At the Art in Action fair.



Beltring Hop Farm

silos. The hops are then stored in the barn portion of the oast house and also compressed into bags for transport to the brewery.

The War and Peace show is an annual event for military wannabees. The placard at the show reads: The vehicles on display are examples of the 3500 plus vehicles, which, with their owners, make an annual pilgrimage to Beltring Hop Farm. Together they create the World's largest military living history event. The battle re-enactments, demonstrations, Old world funfair rides, alongside the Hop Farm attractions, and a massive 400,000 feet of trade stands make for a fantastic day out for all the family.



A static display and a line-up of military types.

old carriage door. Later they opened the carriage door. I wonder if they were trying to tell us something?

On the Friday we returned to Horsmonden via Oxford where we went to an Art in Action fair in the grounds of a local manor. Some weird stuff and some good stuff. Enjoyed watching the glassblower. Mentioned that I'm glad he remembers to blow and not suck. Wife looked pained, but it amused a lady nearby.

The following day I went to the War and Peace Show at the Paddock Wood Beltring Hop Farm. The farm is a living museum type thing and apart from farm animals and amusements for the children, they also show you how hops are prepared for the brewing process.

Hops are dried in the silos of the oast house. Below in the silo is a radiator. Warm air rises through the hops in the middle of the silo and a wind vane at the top keeps an opening at the top open to the air on the leeward side. This keeps rain from getting into the silo and the wind blown air passing the opening also creates a lee vacuum that helps to draw the warm air through the hops, thereby drying it. The ventilation rate can be controlled by vents inside the top of the



Wannabees walked around in the full realistic kit. From British army uniforms to German army (very popular) US army and even Japanese army uniforms, it was all there. One could buy a camshaft for a tank to a Busby for a wannabee funny looking. Some of the kit was genuine, some was very good imitation kit.

Princess of Wales Royal Regiment, had a recruiting stand at the show. It is the regiment of Surry, Kent, Sussex, Hampshire and the Channel Islands. It is also the regiment that drove the Dutch out of the Cape, South Africa, long ago around 1800.



Princess of Wales Royal Regiment stand.

The following day, Sunday, my sister-in-law, wife and I were invited to lunch at the house of a couple that are friends of sister-in-law. He was in a senior position at Barclays Bank and now retired. They breed Alpacas. Interesting and somewhat cute animals from South America. They keep the males and females apart, because apparently the females don't leave the males alone.



Free range Alpacas.

Toward the end of our stay daughter-in-law with baby, took wife and I south to Rye. It's a beautiful near seaside town and we did the walking rounds of the cobbled streets in the hilly old section. Originally Rye was a seaside village, but due to silting in is now about four kilometres inland.

First, we walked past the Mermaid Hotel, which was "re-built" in 1420 and then the church with a curious structure in the church ground. Transpires it is an old water cistern. The cistern was built between 1733 and 1736 to supply water to the village. An interesting plaque explains that on the 11th October 1733, the Mayor J. Lamb and the Jurats of Rye sought permission for the building of the cistern from Lord Wilmington, who owned the land. Consent was also obtained from the Bishop and Edward Wilson, the vicar of Rye.



The Mermaid Hotel and Rye Gate.

We also looked at the Ypres Tower (or small Castle) built in 1249 by order of King Henry III then on to the Landgate. The gate was built in 1329 when Edward III gave permission for further fortification of the town. It is one of four built and the only one left in existence. The Landgate had gates, a portcullis and a drawbridge. The villagers were serious about keeping unwanted visitors out.



The cistern left. The Ypres Tower right.

We then went on to Hastings. The best that can be said about Hastings is that we bought the best fish and chips I have tasted in Priory Road. We then drove into the countryside to a lovely village called Sedlescombe where we sat on a bench under the shade of a big spreading tree in the village and ate our delicious lunch on a warm summer's day, surrounded by the village shops, an Inn and an old hotel. A lovely setting out of a picture book.



Two views of our picnic spot in Sedlescombe.



A view of Bodiam Castle.

From there we went to the picturesque Bodiam Castle. The castle looks exactly how I think most people imagine a medieval castle. Square with a tower at each corner and surrounded by a moat. The baby liked the castle as well. Especially the gravel path where, whenever possible, he sat down to play with the stones and was not happy to move on. He is a lovely and happy lad and waddles around like a penguin.

In 1385 Sir Edward Dalyngrigge, a soldier of fortune who made his wealth during the

Hundred Years War, obtained a royal licence to fortify his manor house in order to protect the local area from a possible French invasion. Instead, he used the licence to build an entirely new castle nearby. Little is known about the castle and its use and debate continues whether it was really built as a defensive fortress, or as an elaborate stately home. It also does not appear to have been inhabited after the 15th century. Later owners, in particular Lord Curzon, who acquired the castle in 1917, have undertaken restoration of Bodiam. Nice and clean toilets at the souvenir shop at the entrance to the car park.



Our transport home with drivers and attendants included in the cost.

That was pretty much it. We spent the last day quietly at home and then returned to the heat of the UAE. The Brits were sweltering in 30°C to 32°C temperatures. We returned to that temperature at one in the morning when we had to clean the layer of dust off the car at the airport parking. In fact, the car looked like a sand dune. Daytime temperatures in the UAE at this time were 46°C to 48°C with lots of humidity.

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