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Destination: England

## A Victorian Holiday

*In Lincoln, ghosts of Christmas past set tone for a Dickens of a celebration*

December 15, 1996 | HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP | Drohojowska-Philp is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer

LINCOLN, England — Blame it on Charles Dickens. I'm a sucker for Christmas. From the glittering pine tree towering over beribboned gift boxes to the sticky cliché, "God bless us every one," my expectations are based upon a holiday defined by Dickens and other excessive Victorians.

The problem? I live in Los Angeles and, for 11 months of the year, I believe it to be the promised land. But when the twinkly lights of reindeer leaping across Rodeo Drive have to fight to be seen against the searing December sunshine and not a single caroler has warbled "Jingle Bells" at my front door, I yearn for a chilly, piney, snowy clime. Better yet, I need to go to the source of Christmas mythology: England.

From Heathrow to Harrods, London overflows with seasonal spirit, not to mention spirits. But a little of that goes a long way, and after a few days there last December, I was eager for a more intimate experience. So it was that I traveled with my English husband, David, to visit my in-laws in the town of Lincoln. Situated in the East Midlands, 135 miles north of London, this ancient city can trace its history back 20 centuries and still drags its feet at change.

The cobblestone streets of Lincoln were festooned with strands of simple white Christmas lights. The shops, mostly stone buildings dating from the Middle Ages, modestly displayed a few holiday items in their windows. Pheasants and ducks brought in by local hunters hung in the window of the butcher shop. Plum puddings and fresh confections beckoned from the bakery. It snowed a little and was quiet. I felt as though I'd been airlifted into a Currier and Ives etching.

Yet, Lincoln is not an artificially enhanced Disneyesque experience. Well-preserved though this hoary city may be, there is little pandering to heritage. No signs proclaim "Ye Olde Pub," or even "Ye Olde Starbucks." Understated and dignified, life in the city is centered around the famous Lincoln Cathedral, which has been offering Christmas services for 900 years.

What distinguishes Lincoln from any number of other charming cities in England is that it is not a hamlet in aspic but a moderately large city with plenty to avail a visitor's curiosity. Yet, it is largely undiscovered by American tourists.

Because I arrived for Christmas week, I missed their biggest tourist event--the annual Christmas Market, which draws visitors from all over Europe and the Far East. Held during the first weekend of December (Dec. 4 to 7 next year) it features 200 decorated stalls on the castle grounds offering arts and crafts, comestibles and grog, with the sellers dressed in Victorian costume. There are performances by choirs, carolers and thespians, with revelry spilling into the streets late into the night and culminating with a major recital by the Lincoln Cathedral Choral Society.

The cathedral is considered one of the finest medieval buildings in Europe and the primary reason tourists come to this picturesque city throughout the year. It was built after the Norman Conquest on the top of Lincoln's tallest hill, opposite the castle built in 1068 for William the Conqueror.

During the 12th century, a fire and then an earthquake motivated rebuilding using Romanesque and ornate Early English Gothic embellishments, the addition of sculptural friezes, pointed arches, rib vaults and stained-glass windows. The bishop responsible was canonized St. Hugh in 1220 and his shrine is in the cathedral. He brought one of four copies of the Magna Carta to Lincoln in 1215, and it is on view at the castle. (Not to be confused with the Magna Carta pub on Castle Square.)

More than an architectural monument to be ticked off a list for sightseers, Lincoln Cathedral serves as the very center of the community with an ambitious program of musical events and services. I went for Evensong, the evening prayer service that is partially sung, and sat with the regular parishioners in the 14th century carved oak stalls, the uplifting atmosphere augmented by lacy stone spires and candle-lighted chandeliers. A dozen young choirboys dressed in crisp white surplices, hair combed, cheeks flushed pink against their pale skin, lifted their voices in a magical unity, their songs floating through the chilly air, echoing against the old stone walls and stained-glass windows. "World Without End." Amen.

The acoustics of Lincoln Cathedral are so highly regarded that its choral society has been recorded singing Christmas hymns, and CDs and tapes are for sale in the gift shop.

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Atop one pillar in the cathedral, there lurks the scandalous Lincoln imp, an obviously pagan bit of stonework hidden among the carved acanthus leaves, a relic of Anglo-Saxon workers leaving behind evidence of their own animistic faith. Another bit of history lies in the graffiti carved into the wall by soldiers who used the church as a stable during the 17th century civil war. My husband quipped, "You see, even our graffiti is older than your entire country!"

A few hundred yards away from the cathedral stands William the Conqueror's Castle, which was fitted with an observatory tower in the last century. After a perilous climb to the ramparts, I could see the spectacular views of Lincoln's sprawl and the surrounding farmland, patched with snow. The adjoining Victorian prison and gallows offer rather gruesome diversions for the imagination.

Both castle and cathedral are located at the north end of town in the Castle Square, the best place to begin a tour of Lincoln. A half-timbered building there houses the Tourist Information Centre, where walking maps are available. The White Hart Hotel is nearby and well-suited to the season with its traditional furnishings and fare. Wild mallard, Lincolnshire partridge and locally smoked salmon were on the menu along with a traditional pudding known as spotted dick, guaranteed to provoke chuckles for the innocent American visitor.

In London, I had rented a car and driven for more than three hours on the wrong side of the road through fogs and rain. By the time I reached Lincoln, I was happy to park the beast and leave it. I walked everywhere in town, enjoying the crisp weather, the aged quality of the streets, the little shops.

Although most of Lincoln's buildings date from the Middle Ages, its history dates back to Roman times, about AD60, when garrisons were housed near the River Witham. A bit of local lore has it that the famous Roman IX Legion Hispana was directed north from Lincoln toward the city of York and disappeared without a trace.

Recent excavations in Lincoln have revealed Roman public buildings and baths, aqueducts and gateways, and stone walls that surrounded the city. In the 3rd century, Lincoln was considered one of the showplaces of Roman Britain along with Gloucester and York. The Romans were such competent builders that many of their ruins are still functional. Walking uphill from Castle Square, you come to Newport Arch, the only Roman gateway in Britain still used by automobile traffic. Beyond lie the ruins of the Roman East Gate.

By the 10th century, Lincoln had a population second only to London and was a major trading center because of its proximity to the River Witham and the deep-water harbor Brayford Pool. William the Conqueror was attracted to Lincoln for its waterways and strategic hilltop location above the flat planes of Lincolnshire.

During this period, Lincoln's prosperity was based on the wool trade. As a cloth-making center, it produced wool called Lincoln Green, which gained notoriety for its association with Robin Hood. Sherwood Forest is in the neighboring county of Nottingham.

From Castle Square, I descended a street aptly named Steep Hill where medieval stone buildings house restaurants, such as Brown's Pie Shop, specializing for the last century in traditional meat pies and ale. Or the Wig and Mitre, a 14th century timber-framed pub, as well as stores selling everything from Scottish tartans to antique porcelain. The weather was brisk but not bitter, so the street was bustling with last-minute shoppers like me.

Instead of Toys R Us, tiny shops offered stuffed dolls and puzzles. Schaffers (Cobb Hall Craft Centre, St. Paul's Lane, Bailgate) sold handmade music boxes, colorful nutcracker figures and Black Forest clocks all imported from Germany. For that matter, the Toy Museum (26 Westgate) would be a great place to take little ones for a history of serious play.

Needlework is still a widespread pastime in England, and Hemsleys (28 Steep Hill) was appealingly cluttered with displays of enviable needlepoint prowess and yarns and patterns to make your own pillows or tapestries. Several antique shops seemed to offer quite reasonably priced pieces compared to Los Angeles. I found silver to be especially well priced and there are all manner of accouterments that are common here and quite rare in America, such as egg cups, salt cellars and toast racks. Basically, anything to do with breakfast, which remains a sensible English institution. Sugar-free muffins and nonfat decaf lattes are not to be found, especially in Lincoln.

I rarely miss American food or drink when I travel, but coffee in England, it must be admitted, is largely undrinkable. I was thrilled to find Pimento, a cafe on Steep Hill that proved the exception by serving excellent strong coffee and, get this, vegetarian food and pastries made with whole wheat and honey for wayward Californians.

Harding House, farther down Steep Hill, is a craft complex in a 16th century brick building where potters work and a gallery is devoted to the ceramics, jewelry and textiles of local artisans.

My leisurely stroll brought me to the dividing point between the Upper City and the Lower City. At this juncture stands the Harlequin Galleries (22 Steep Hill), an antiquarian bookseller in a 16th century half-timbered house. It offers volumes that would fetch double in the United States, or even in London. I purchased a leather-and gilt-covered volume of poetry by Alfred Lord Tennyson, who was born in nearby Somersby. Proceeding a few hundred feet down the hill to Danesgate, I left the shoppers behind and entered the Usher Gallery on Lindum Road.

This pretty red brick museum was built in 1927 at the bequest of James Ward Usher, a jeweler who made a fortune selling replicas of the Lincoln imp. He left

his comprehensive collection of antique pocket watches and decorative arts to the gallery. The elaborately jeweled and enameled timepieces are displayed in neoclassical rooms along with an impressive array of rare English porcelain and 19th century watercolors of local scenes by Peter DeWint.

The pressing reason for a visit, however, is a small display of items that belonged to Queen Victoria's friend and poet laureate Tennyson. A glass case contains his black floppy hat, umbrella and cape, as well as paintings of him and his family by his friend G. F. Watts and others. (Watts' bronze sculpture of Tennyson stands just outside the Castle Square.) I put on a wobbly headset to hear a scratchy recording of Tennyson himself, who died in 1892, reading in his gravelly voice "The Charge of the Light Brigade." It turns out that the Lincoln Central Library contains his libraries and correspondence.

As Steep Hill levels off, it becomes High Street, which leads to the 16th century Stonebow, a gateway carved with a figure of the Virgin Mary, to whom the city is dedicated. Farther south in the Lower City is the medieval church St. Mary le Wigford, with a tower built not long after the Norman Conquest.

In the lower reaches of Lincoln, older buildings are impinged upon by regulation department stores. Although Boots Pharmacy has its own appeal, a quick detour led me to the nearby River Witham and Brayford Pool, where swans cruised in hopes of a tidbit from a tourist. In the Georgian period, improvements were made to the River Witham and Brayford Pool so that it became Britain's fourth most important port. Pictures of the harbor were painted by J. M. W. Turner, and Lincoln attracted fashionable nobility and gentry. Today, a glass and brick shopping mall, the Waterside Centre, runs along the river. Although heated, the indoor shopping felt too much like being at the Beverly Center.

Even in the cold weather, the walk alongside the river was exceedingly pleasant, watching brave sailboats and small fishing craft plow the murky waves. But it was time to walk back up High Street and Steep Hill. I stopped halfway at the Carousel Chocolaterie (24 Steep Hill) for the fresh cherries covered in Belgian chocolate.

I marched on, invited by the incomparable sound of church bells tolling their mellow, grand music as dusk fell. When I reached my in-laws' home, fresh pheasants were roasting in the oven, a fire raged in the hearth and, sure enough, some well-padded carolers showed up at the door to sing "We Wish You a Merry Christmas!"

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## GUIDEBOOK

### Lincoln Legends

Getting there: Nonstop service LAX-London on American, British Airways, Delta, Virgin Atlantic, United and Air New Zealand; direct flights on Northwest and Continental. Round-trip fares begin at about \$950 including tax for the Christmas season, generally Dec. 13 through 24. Discounted fares of about \$500 round trip resume after Christmas.

Rent a car at Heathrow in London and drive the A-1 to Newark, then take the A-46. Lincoln is 40 miles east of Nottingham.

Where to stay: If you plan to be in Lincoln for Christmas Day, remember that the holiday includes Boxing Day and even one or two days after, during which nearly all shops and sites will be closed. Restaurants and hotels remain open; hotel reservations are essential.

The White Hart Hotel (Bailgate; telephone 011-44-1522-526222). Rooms are from \$140 to \$240 per night including service and value added tax but no breakfast. But this 14th century hotel with antiques and impeccable service is the most exclusive choice.

D'Isney Place Hotel (Eastgate; tel. 011-44-1522-538881, fax 011-44- 1522-511321). Rooms from \$90 to \$130 per night, including breakfast served in your bedroom. The family-operated Georgian building is near the cathedral.

There are many smaller hotels and guest houses in the area. For a complete list, contact the Lincoln Tourist Information Centre, 9 Castle Hill, Lincoln LN1 3AA; tel. 011-44-1522- 529828.

For more information: British Tourist Authority, 551 Fifth Ave., Suite 701, New York 10176-0799; tel. (800) 462- 2748 or (212) 986-2200, fax (212) 986-1188.