

My Somerset Life

A diary by Brian Snellgrove

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Strange Hotel, strange town

Cross country rides take longer than you think. I departed from base around 10 am from Midsomer Norton which as most of you may know is about 10 miles south of Bath, and I set my satnav to avoid motorways and thus just travel on normal A roads. The total elapsed time according to the AA will be 2 hours 55 minutes for a distance of 145 miles.

However before going to my destination I wanted to re-visit



Avebury which contains one of the most sophisticated communication systems consisting of rock crystals which were placed in strategic locations throughout the United Kingdom and of course other places in the world to

facilitate communication. If we had any idea of the advanced thinking of civilizations that have come before us, we would have more respect for them. Anyway, it took me over an hour to get there and that was partly because the roads were flooded and we had to turn back. Normally I do not trust flooding signs as workers often forget to remove them when the danger has passed but on this occasion when I saw vehicles reversing I knew that this was for real.

I can trust my satnav wherever I am to convey me to the right place and so I arrived and went to my usual parking place by a pub on the main road to find that there were no parking places. I went to the National Trust owned parking places just before the village proper starts, and found that I would have to pay for a whole day. That, coupled with the distinctly wet conditions, was a disincentive to visit on this occasion and so I went a few miles further to La Strada which is a very good Italian restaurant which provided me with a huge pasta

redolent with chicken which more than filled me up. I find Italian waiters delightful to deal with because they really know and feel their jobs, and service is in their veins.

I had heard a lot about Milton Keynes and I visited the fringes of it a number of years ago but had forgotten the finer details of the architecture. All I remember were endless roundabouts. Basically, the whole thing is a massive rectangle consisting of tall buildings and walking ways separated from the roads which go north south, and east-west rather like in America.

ound Milton Keynes

Central Milton Keynes

There are plenty of things to do in Central Milton Keynes. Whether you are looking to shop, relax or just have fun, there is something for everyone.



THEATRE DISTRICT

Milton Keynes' Theatre District is well known as the place to eat, drink and have fun. It offers a varied selection of restaurants and bars as well as Milton Keynes Theatre - one of the region's leading live entertainment venues - and MK Gallery - a public gallery providing high quality, thought provoking contemporary art.

THE HUB/MK

The Hub is a vibrant restaurant, cafe, hotel, retail and business quarter right in the very heart of Milton Keynes. It's a great place to enjoy a bit of retail therapy and then stay for a while to eat in one of the many restaurants or cafes. The main piazza encompasses a range of retail outlets and restaurants, many with outdoor eating areas.



XSCAPE

Snow slopes, indoor sky-diving, rock climbing, bowling, multiplex cinema, gym and fitness centre, bars, restaurants and urban retail outlets all under one roof.

CAMPBELL PARK



Campbell Park is Milton Keynes very own Central Park. Close to the city centre, the park's mix of formal gardens, woodland and open pasture provide a green oasis for residents and visitors alike.

SHOPPING



THE CENTRE/MK

The CentreMK is a regional shopping destination with over 240 stores, cafes and restaurants all under one roof. Anchored by John Lewis, House of Fraser, Marks & Spencer and Next, the CentreMK is the premier shopping destination in the region between London and Birmingham, Cambridge and Oxford, and is unrivalled in its customer service.

MIDSUMMER PLACE

Midsummer Place has more than 30 stores situated along stunning malls with massive names in clothing including Topshop, Zara, Gap, H&M, Jane Norman, Barli, Karen Millen and Hugo Boss. Hollister, Sainsbury, Levi's to name a few. Midsummer Place is also home to a fantastic Debenhams and exclusive outlets such as Apple and Lego and boasts great places to eat and relax.



Station Square

Station Square has been remodeled to be easily accessible for all and provide the best possible interchange for all modes of transport.

- Bus stop
- Taxi
- Drop-Off / Pick-up point
- Cycle route
- Car Park
- Cycle parking
- Disabled parking
- Information

Outside of Central Milton

Many destinations in Milton Keynes lie outside of the City Centre, including the Open University and Bletchley Park.

Some destinations will be within walking or cycling distance, but others may require a short bus or taxi journey.

- E6 Bletchley Park Museum
- C3 City Discovery Centre
- G2 Coachway
- C2 Concrete Cows
- E4 Milton Keynes General Hospital
- C2 Milton Keynes Museum
- D4 MK Bowl
- F4 Open University
- G4 The Stables
- E5 Stadium MK

- Cycle route
- Train Station
- Hospital
- Point of Interest

I stayed at the Leonardo Hotel which was on the appropriately named Midsummer Boulevard bearing in mind the name of my own town. I will do a review for TripAdvisor but this is a very well run well maintained premises where the staff were so well trained as a team that I knew without meeting the manager that the management was good.

People came in dribs and drabs. What, I hear you ask, is a drib and what is a drab? This phrase means 'in small and irregular quantities or in small pieces'. It's origin is unknown which makes it all the more interesting. You can tell who the conference types are as opposed to ordinary members of the public. I don't know how I can tell but there's a certain feeling of comradeship among us all. This is the 13th Alternative View meeting which was bought into life by Ian R. Crane now deceased may his soul rest in peace.

About 200 people are due to attend.

It was quite clear that this hotel was going to be full to busting on this Saturday Night. On the first floor, post wedding celebrations were taking place and people were dressed to the nines and loud Afro Caribbean music was playing.

I received my room keys and went to inspect my room. I never unpack until I am content with my room after having inspected it. It was in an unfortunate corner, had no view, and was a rather strange shape. Also there was a rather loud humming from some fans. I did not feel comfortable with it so I went straight down again and asked for another room which I got without questioning. It was facing the front but such traffic noise as there was died down during the evening so it was no trouble.



The room was very well designed with plenty of space in the bathroom to put your stuff, a shower with simple controls, a clean floor, and amazingly everything worked. The bed was huge and the only unfortunate thing was the duvet that was a winter duvet which made me very hot as I was to discover. I had a moment of anomie or alienation so I switched on the very generously sized TV to find a familiar face, Michael Portillo, journeying to yet another corner of the world.

One thing you really need to get your head round as the parking. More and more these days, the system is geared to paying by a parking app rather than putting coins into a machine and sure enough this pertained in Milton Keynes. I had previously signed up for an app called Ringo and I'm so glad I did. When you turn on your app, it knows exactly where you are and how much you have to pay. We were warned that there were two parking areas. One was just outside the hotel with blue markings and that cost £15 a day, the other one with pink markings was an every day parking area where you paid 50p an hour.

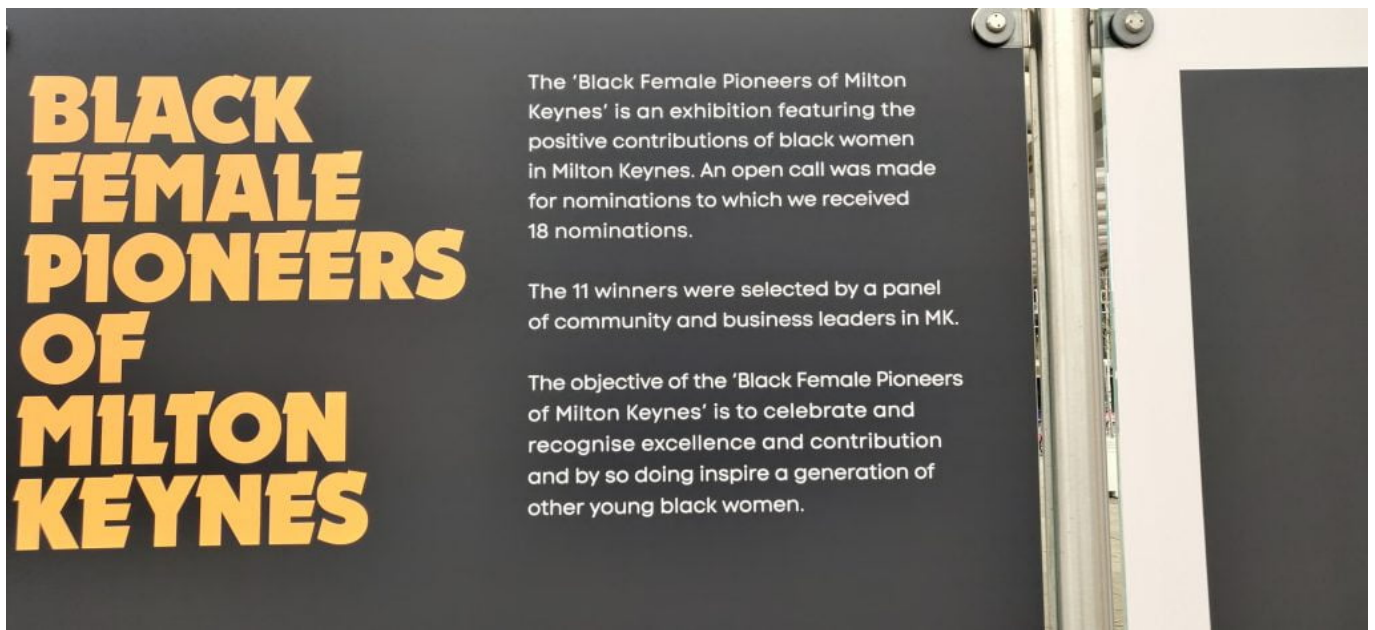
We had some rather entertaining language from someone who parked and paid for his car in the wrong area. The staff of the hotel did not take any blame because he had not read the instructions carefully enough. What I like about the app is

that you get told how much you have spent with all the detail by text message immediately after you make the purchase so hopefully I will not have an unpleasant shock when I return home, receiving a parking ticket.



Ghastly design that says nothing

After this I decided to visit the town centre to discover that there is no Center as such. At the end of the rectangle there is the train station and overall it is a horrible and soulless assembly of almost Brutalist concrete. The accompanying images will give some idea of what I experienced. By the station, someone who was obviously high on something grabbed a chair from one of the cafes, attempted to put it on his head, and walked in a rather strange fashion down the road. He eventually collapsed and one of his friends rescued the chair and took it back to the cafe. In the station itself, there was a long queue of people waiting and only one ticket office counter was open. From time to time, someone shouted in a very loud voice but I could not see who it was.



If we are to believe the posters, Milton Keynes was constructed by black females. No reference was there to any person of white persuasion. They had been airbrushed out.



Everything here is on a very big scale and I guess that part of the reason for this is the when they wanted to build the main infrastructure of the town they offered very good rates. The room in my hotel was about twice the size that I am used to and was more than enough room for a couple never mind one person.



- There was certainly an interesting ethical mix here. In Sainsbury's, we had happy Diwali and also quite a big section selling suitably haunting objects for Halloween. I don't think I've ever seen such a big Sainsbury's. It was almost like a superstore but in a area of superstores it did not stand out

I went a few blocks to look at the Sainsburys store and it was so big, I'm sure under certain circumstances it would produce its own weather. I noticed that Santander bank has its headquarters just along the way in a huge building.



However, design is one thing, maintenance is another. I noticed that most of the green areas had been un maintained and were full of weeds and thus very scruffy and unattractive. It is such a pity because if everything is in good order the whole would look very nice but I agree that autumn, with its falling leaves, doesn't make the job of the maintenance people any easier. On design and building I noticed that the paving stones were uneven and that means that lower quality contractors were employed at the early stages probably in a rush to get the original job finished.

On first glance I would not recommend this town for anything other than business. I met two groups of foreign tourists in the hotel, both of whom were from the Netherlands, who had used this as a basis to visit Oxford and Stratford-upon-Avon, William Shakespeare's own country.



The evening party scene was warming up so I decided to retreat to my room at an early hour. I saw one or two people I knew but I felt that being on my own would for once be a benefit, a decent interregnum between home life with all its features much as I love them, and a slightly different world that I was going to engage with the following day being with people who were on the wavelength and knowing what was really going on. I know that the speakers are going to be preaching to the

choir but reinforcement of what we know about how things really work is quite encouraging and satisfying from the soul point of view.

I could not be bothered to watch the TV or even to read so into the arms of Morpheus I went. There was the odd shout in the corridor but after a party you expect that sort of thing.

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