

Hoddesdon 2018

By Jane W

The train whizzed through the English countryside. The carriage in which the four of us sat was rather strange – more like a tube than anything I'd seen in on the rail network before. The seats backed on to the windows so that my friends and I faced each other across the width of the coach.

“Hoddesdon next stop”.

I reached down for my rucksack. Damn. I'd left it in Lytham. Never mind I could manage.

The strain slowed, then came to a jarring stop. We'd been warned about this; get off quick, the train won't pause for long.

We jumped down on to a tiny concrete platform, slick with green algae. Above us a matrix sign flashed orange letters. Hoddesdon: Temperature -2 C.

We still wore yesterday evening's finery; I didn't even have a coat. It had been a warm spring day in Lytham.

“Hoddesdon has a micro climate” someone explained as we passed from the station onto the high street. I felt the chill. Surrounding us vast snow-capped, Alpine peaks rose from a fir forest.

We hurried towards the venue.

“Where's the hotel, Jane?”

“Hotel? I didn't book a hotel.” The narrow high street looked like a stage set for Oliver Twist. No Premier in or Travel Lodge here.

We stopped outside a bow window. The little panes of glass were crusted with frost but a comforting yellow glow of candlelight came from behind them.

“It's an inn,” said one of my friends. “I'll check if they do rooms.”

A minute later she returned.

“So the good news is, they have a room. Just one. It's a double bed.”

Something chirruped in my ear, a familiar noise that meant...

Time to wake up!

Right so back in the real world...

The sun shone, bright and warm through the hotel window. The journey to the final venue of the weekend was still before us. We wouldn't be travelling by train. I would be taking my rucksack. And my coat!

We'd arranged to meet early, to get on the road as fast as possible.

As I walked towards our rendezvous I stopped, incredulous. One of the chip-shops we'd been looking for yesterday was right in front of me looking smug. Yes, buildings can look smug. This one did at least.

The five of us scrambled back into the car, failing to break our personal best for getting our seat-belts on. Unfortunately only four would be going to the weekend's final gig. The birthday-girl of yesterday alas, couldn't make it, but at least we'd all be travelling back down south together.

Hoddesdon. This was one of those I hadn't intending on going to. I checked the trains when it was announced, realised that it didn't have a train station, and wrote it off. Ah but my lovely friends sorted out that for me. Thanks so much as always to my drivers for the lifts.

The drive down was somewhat less uproarious than the drive up. We were of course all tired but also didn't want our driver having to stop to wipe away tears of laughter again. Nevertheless the chatter didn't let up till London, where we briefly separated.

We split up near London as one of my friends needed to collect her car. We devised a plan: Two cars – one passenger in each. That way the passengers could text one another and avoid a Milton Keynes moment. Clever, yes?

We passengers took our responsibilities as communication officers very seriously.

Text incoming: "We have just left Marylebone ETA one hour."

Text outgoing: "We have just set off. ETA approximately the same."

Then as we approached the town...

Text outgoing: "We have reached Hoddesdon. Looking for somewhere to park."

Text incoming: "We are four minutes away."

Text outgoing: "We are in the Police Station car park."

Text incoming: "!?"

Text outgoing: "We are locationally challenged. Turning round."

Text incoming: "We did wonder."

Text outgoing: "We have found a car park. We are parking up."

Text incoming: "We have parked at the theatre. Where are you?"

Text outgoing: "Not sure. It's a play and display."

Text incoming: "OK can you head to the theatre?"

Text outgoing: "Just checking our bearings."

My friend got out of the car. "Jane, they're just there."

OK then – so that worked well.

Despite my subconscious' nocturnal imaginings, Hoddesdon high street does not look like a set for Oliver Twist – or any other Dickensian novel. Perhaps a set in a Miss Marple adaptation though – one of the better quality ones, with Joan Hickson.

We walked the length of it, looking for the Italian restaurant we'd selected for dinner.

One thing my subconscious had got nearly right – the temperature. After yesterday's balmy spring day in Lytham St Annes, the south of the country surprised us with a noticeable chill. Even though I wore a nice sensible spring cum autumn coat I was very grateful to reach the warmth of the restaurant.

We enjoyed a pleasant, early dinner (lunch had consisted of a slice of toast) but didn't linger for desert and coffee as the loud 'background' music drove us out. I can only assume that the regular patrons don't bother to chat over dinner. Not to worry. We'd passed plenty of cafes and restaurants on the way to the Italian; and a nice looking pub – or if nothing floated our boat (I'm now imagining a boating lake full of tea - no bad thing) we could adjourn to the theatre café.

No tea drinking opportunities presented themselves; we'd hit the dreaded tea/coffee dead zone between cafes closing and restaurants opening. Fine, either the pub or the venue would no doubt supply us with a hot caffeinated beverage.

I was still scouting for tea when, about halfway down the road, I stopped, well and truly creeped out. I was looking straight into the window of the inn from my dream. Oooooo. Now if I had actually been staring into a warm, candlelit pub I might have got over my Twilight Zone moment in the hope of a brew, but no - only the window came from my dream. It fronted an empty building. The frosty rime of my imagination turned out to be a heavy layer of dust, behind which I saw a grey, cold, empty room – but it was the same booming window. (Cue the X-Files theme.)

Anyway – tea. Nothing else having presented itself we went into the pub. The pub turned out to be a noisy, sports bar. We headed to the theatre.

Two of the regulars had met us on our walk. They were on a quest of their own, looking for somewhere to eat as the theatre café, they said, didn't open till 6.30pm. I didn't doubt the ladies but I thought whoever had told them that had made a mistake. Theatregoers would be left with very little time to eat before an evening show if they didn't open till 6.30pm. In any case we wanted a brew, not food and I felt surely we'd be able to get a tea or coffee there.

Wrong.

Half the bar area was shuttered off when we arrived. Despite there being several members of staff behind it, and the area that held the coffee machine being in the open half, we were not to be served.

I am speaking with the memory of tea-deprivation here, so I apologise to The Spotlight, but I was not impressed. Besides leaving a small, helpless Lopy to wilt from lack of Tetley's or other substitute (don't tell me I'm being over dramatic! This was serious! Just coz the others took it in their stride...) they'd made a rather foolish business decision. As the place filled up

they would have done a very brisk trade in soft drinks (even if their licence didn't allow alcohol sales before 6.30pm) had they been more flexible. (Rant over. What do you mean 'good'?)

Lots of familiar faces joined us in the seating area and the time went by with "Hellos", "How are you?" and "What do you mean they're not serving coffee yet?"

Then at last with a delectable rattle the shutters raised, and I scrambled for the bar, trampling little old ladies on the way, demanding TEA NOW OR ELSE!!!!*

(* This is of course an exaggeration. I joined the queue like everyone else and told the nice chap serving I was gasping. But oh I was *thinking TEA NOW OR ELSE!!!*)

With the lovely refreshing cuppa down my neck, I returned to my usual, charming and ladylike self (say nothing), and the auditorium opened.

Writing this as I'm doing, two weeks after the event, my memory of The Spotlight (other than the wait for tea) is a bit hazy. I recall wide, open, modern space with a stage some what lower than the Lowther Pavilion's but still quite high. Oh gosh yes... things are coming back... I think it was the Spotlight I guessed could be used for other functions as well as theatre shows, because it had removal seats. Ooo and I remember joking about being like the back seat of the car because the chairs were quite narrow. Nice leg room though – and I am not complaining about my seat at all!

Being late deciding to join this particular party my booked seat was a little further back than I would like, near the end of Row E. As our group were one woman down, I was offered the spare spot: second row, centre, surrounded by friends – it couldn't have been better.

Show time.

The house lights dimmed, conversation stilled, and the audience applauded as Adam walked...hold on – that's not Adam! The new pianist seated himself, began the familiar intro, and my little brain screamed "Who is that?" I recognised the guy but just couldn't place him.

A moment later Lee appeared, and I shelved the puzzling over Adam's replacement as I took up Lee's invitation to join him in that world of 'Pure Imagination'.

Another beautifully lit stage - the lighting technician wrapped Lee in a glow of delicate pastels. Mmmmm, lovely. Better than tea.

Now for band introductions, and of course I recognised Adam's stand-in; I saw him once a month from March to November last year. Mickey Blue, as Lee calls him, was an ideal replacement, being as much in sync with Lee as Adam is, and just as talented a musician. The other band members trooped on to appreciative cheers: Tommy, Lee's old friend; Ian, and enclosed behind a perspex screen (drummers aren't that dangerous are they?); Richie, on bass; and John, who has won himself so many fans not only for his skills as a violinist but for the emotion he puts into every performance. Lee's fans welcomed him with an extra big cheer.

Then he (Lee I mean not John) turned to the audience with his usual thanks for coming and compliments about the venue. He openly admitted that he'd not heard of Hoddesdon before being booked to perform at The Spotlight. That could, I supposed, have offended the locals, but no. Lee's far too charming, and his sincerity won him far more respect than empty, formulaic, flattery would.

The set list for the first half of the show pretty much followed the same running order as in Lytham St Annes – except that they moved 'Bring Him Home' back to its post interval slot along side 'Empty Chairs at Empty Tables'.

If his energy levels weren't quite as exalted as they'd been the night before, Lee's voice was still on fabulous form, and he looked just as happy, excited and handsome as at the very beginning of the weekend. He must have been wiped-out after travelling up and down England to deliver three shows. You wouldn't have known it.

It's so often difficult to single out particular songs, but a stand out at this show – and really at every show I have seen him perform it, has to be the remarkable 'Why God Why'.

I think I have generally reviewed Lee's performances of 'Why God Why' with a simple "Wow!" as it really does leave me speechless. I'm going to try to tell you more about it, or rather about how it makes me feel, here.

I haven't seen Miss Saigon. I strongly suspect it's not my kind of musical – too dark, too distressing. Consequently, the only version of 'Why God Why' I have ever heard is Mr Mead's, so I have nothing to compare Lee's version to.

I first heard it as one of those snippets on You-Tube. Lee in Joseph school singing accapela...accippela..acka... unaccompanied. I didn't care very much for the song itself – the melody is challenging, the subject matter difficult– but it gave Lee a real opportunity to demonstrate how to act a song. I could only listen with awe as delivered that awkward crescendo without even a guitar to keep him on track. I admired it without liking it. If that makes sense.

Of course 'Why God Why' is now a staple of Lee's set lists, and I've changed my opinion. Familiarity, far from breeding contempt, has heightened my appreciation, to the extent it's now one of my favourites of Lee's repertoire.

As Lee embarked on his story of his audition for the Chris's second cover (in front of an audience of 3,000. No pressure!), I shuffled forward in my seat. Immediately, I'm transported to Vietnam, that filthy room with the rusty bed. Lee became Chris the GI. He didn't need the crew cut or the fatigues. He never needs costume or scenery to become a character. (I mean, this is the guy who sold 'Gethsemane' while wearing a novelty Christmas jumper.) It's all there in his face – the confusion, the pity, the anger – and in that voice, rising up to rant at heaven, until the final anguished wail "just her" resounds around the theatre.

Now that's the way to deliver a song.

After interval, and a very fine and emotional performance of 'Feeling Good', Lee gave us another opportunity to quiz him in a Q&A. I have my own (perfectly sensible honest) question to ask should one of these sessions ever flag, but just like every other Q&A session this tour the locals were eager to find out more about Mr Mead. They had loads to ask.

No odd questions this time, and nothing about his personal life. Someone asked where he'd be for panto this year, and he said he didn't know. I wonder how we would have reacted had he said "Aberdeen"!

Lee really seemed to be enjoying this particular Q&A and began to get quite giddy.

A question about his first professional job brought us an extended recreation of singing 'I Can't Take My Eyes off of You' on a North Sea ferry in a storm. Each time Lee staggered sideways across the stage brought a new and louder burst of hilarity from his audience. I keep mentioning Lee's great talent for visual comedy, this was one more demonstration. Funny to think the fans he's made since joining Holby City might not have had the chance to see this side of Lee (though of course the Lofty of Casualty showed off his slap-stick skills on a regular basis).

Another question sparked Lee's reminiscences about meeting Ken Dodd in his dressing room. This is a familiar, and very sweet story, about getting the chance to see one's heroes as very real people. What I hadn't witnessed before was Lee's Doddy impression. Gosh it was good! Nothing over the top; Lee just seemed to rearrange his own handsome features to capture the iconic comedian's expression and mannerisms. Impressive. So that's James Blunt and Ken Dodd I have seen him do. I wonder how many other impressions that talented guy has up his sleeve.

But we are here to listen to Lee sing, and sing he did - all those wonderfully emotive performances, one after another, different styles and genres, just to emphasise what a versatile performer Lee Mead is.

No Norman Wisdom moments this time; his 'Empty Chairs at Empty Tables' was simple, pure and tragic. My eyes were fixed upon his anguished face, almost without blinking.

And following it with 'Bring Him Home' again - tear fest! I couldn't help looking over to John during it. Yep - I'm not the only one. John was crying again. Wonderful!

Then change of mood again - his water break, now very much an expected and enjoyable part of his show. This one included a little extra. He made up lyrics to the band's tune, singing a line about all his colleagues in turn, all the time with that gleeful, naughty school boy expression that had me in stitches more even than his daft little song.

He's remarkable.

Remarkable, just about sums up the show... that weekend in fact. How it raced by! And there we were sitting gazing up at that gorgeous bloke, listening to his amazing voice - and already he was singing 'Blackbird'.

Every time I hear it, I am so thankful he took Betsy to see Boss Baby. 'Blackbird' has always been a favorite of mine and hearing Lee's soft, sweet tones almost whispering those

lyrics, just squeezes my heart every time. I see myself once again in our front room, curled up in Dad's tapestry chair, with the White Album playing, over and over. McCartney's original is utterly lovely, but Lee and Tommy between them have created such a delicate, intricate, beautiful piece...oh Lee thank you so much for taking it on and adding your magic.

Lee asked if we'd like one more number. Well durr!! Of course we do – an if you want to stay on stage till the early hours Lee, feel absolutely free to...but naturally we all knew the drill – this would be his song, the song he'll be singing till he's no voice left. Just as at Lytham he left the stage, donned THE coat quickly, then returned with swirls, a swagger and an enormous grin. The whole audience seemed to be singing-along, either with Lee or doing the children's part - 'aha-a'. A few of us raised our hands to sway along, all the way though. It does take some energy to keep it going – 'Any Dream Will Do' is quite long. Ooo and that proper Joseph ending – "Give me my coloured coat!" Love it, love it, love it!!!

Lee took his bows as one again the audience stood. Lee Mead and his wonderful band certainly made themselves a hit in Hoddesdon. And as I stood there clapping and whooping, I reflected how lucky I am to get to see so many of these shows; to indulge in such fabulous experiences with such great friends...I was getting really emotional.

I didn't have anything to sign, but my friends and I saw no harm in standing in line to share a brief word with him after the show. This time another of my friends spoke for us. I think I mostly nodded and smiled and said words like "fabulous".

And that was it. The third Meady concert in as many days. I can't count the miles we travelled.

Saying 'bye' that night got me all choked up. This time I wasn't saying "See you next month (squeal!)." This time it was "See you in July!". Crickey – summer would be half gone.

Thank you so much every one who made that weekend so very special. The travelling buddies, our lovely drivers, the friends we meet up with – and of course Mr Mead and his marvellous band.

I'll be forgoing the pleasures of the next two weekends of concerts; not for dull, boring reasons (the school reunion I have just been to was an absolute hoot - check out Facebook for our gin fuelled rendition of the school song), and in June I will be Lady Jane for the last time this year as Robert de Clifford hosts a tournament for his pals.

Still I'll miss seeing himself, and more perhaps, my Lee-fan friends: Stage Loppies, Loppies, Meadaholics, Northern Ladies and all those other groups we affiliate with. One name works for all I think – bloody good friends!

Thank you ladies – see you in July xxx