

GPDH ICELAND AUGUST 1964

I had set my mind on taking the whole family on a super holiday to Iceland in the summer. It would have to be done this summer, or never, I reasoned. If we waited another year, Virginia would presumably (at the age of 19½) be involved with under-graduate activities with her University cronies during the summer vacation, whereas this year all three children would be of an age to enjoy such a trip. We had never before been abroad together as a whole family. (And this year, incidentally, it would be exactly thirty years since my first visit to Iceland – with my mother, in 1934.) It was going to be a motoring and camping holiday. I very much wanted to explore parts of the west and north-west of the country which I had not visited before. The Rover 3-Litre was hardly an appropriate vehicle for the Icelandic roads – or for fording the turbulent rivers. But I was on good terms with my erstwhile Navigator (from South Georgia days), Peter Cardno – who possessed a 4WD diesel-engined Land Rover. We agreed to do a temporary swap of vehicles for the month of August – an ideal solution (from my point of view)!

Early in August, with the Land Rover packed with tents, camp-chairs, cooking pots and picnic gear – and several suitcases and rucksacks – I set off from Highgate with Virginia and Nicholas to motor north. We spent one night at Legbourne, en route, and reached Leith the next afternoon. Mary was to join us by train, with Adrian – who, to our dismay and consternation, had developed a last-minute temperature! Would he have recovered in time for them to catch the boat? We parked the laden Land Rover on the dockside, ready to be loaded on board the smart new ‘Gullfoss’ (flagship of the Iceland Steamship Company) – and we hung around, waiting for the others to turn up (and hoping against hope that they would). About an hour later, a taxi drew up – and there they were, Adrian, to our intense relief, having made a complete recovery. As this was to be a very special family holiday, I had booked us all into First Class accommodation on the ship – and it was an exciting moment then, on a lovely summer evening, we cast off and left Leith behind us.

We had a calm three-day passage, rolling a little in the long Atlantic swell, with Adrian assuring himself that he would soon ‘get his sea-legs’ – and Nicholas, rather to our astonishment, showing a marked preference for mingling with the Second Class passengers. The days were long and sunny – and we were all in good spirits as we approached the south coast of Iceland. As always, the passengers thronged the starboard decks, with binoculars to their eyes, for their first glimpse of land – the unmistakable promontory of Dyrhólaey – and after passing that, the Captain took the ship right inshore among spectacular steep rocks rising sheer out of deep water, and threaded his way between them – to the delight and admiration of us all. A few hours later, after passing the Westman Islands (Vestmannaeyjar), we were enshrouded in fog – through which we could just make out the shoreline of the new volcanic island of Surtsey, with incandescent lava flowing into the sea amid clouds of steam – a truly awesome sight.

We spent one day in Reykjavík, making preparations for the coming tour, and spent the night at the Hotel Skjaldbreið. Next morning we were off, along the road running east along the southern shore of Hvalfjörður – a cloudless day of brilliant sunshine, with the country looking superb. By strapping the tents on either side of the Land Rover’s bonnet, we were able to leave enough room for two of the children among the rest of the gear at the back, while the remaining three of us squeezed together on the front seat – and we trundled along like that to the head of the fjord. There we had our first picnic – lunch among the long grass and buttercups in the lee of a rocky ridge beside a swiftly flowing river, basking in the warm sunshine – and marvelling at the peaceful beauty of our surroundings. We saw salmon leaping in the river in front of us – and Nicholas insisted on stripping off and bathing in its crystal clear waters. It was an idyllic spot – and I shall always remember the happiness of that first picnic. For me, it was almost magical.

Afterwards, we wended our way westward towards the Snaefellnes peninsula – and, as the road was quite deserted and open on all sides, I decided to let Virginia drive (under instruction). Suddenly, a tractor towing a large piece of farm machinery appeared, coming in the opposite direction. The road was narrow, and I was sure we were going to hit this oncoming menace – so, rather shamefully losing confidence in Virginia, I seized the wheel and pulled over violently to the side of the road – much to V's annoyance! We continued uneventfully through lush pastures, studded with those endearing dun-coloured Icelandic ponies, to Búðir – close under the lee of the lovely glacier-covered Snaefell.

Búðir is a small settlement on the south side of the peninsula – and I had booked into the little hotel there for the night. We were all rather tired, so went to bed early after a good supper. But we didn't get much sleep. It was a Saturday night – and the locals were celebrating downstairs with rowdy songs into the 'small hours', But Sunday dawned gloriously clear and sunny, with not a breath of wind, so after breakfast we took ourselves off to the beach – all set to bask in the sun and bathe in the sea. That Sunday morning in the warm sunshine at the foot of Snæfellsjökull was another unforgettable episode. There we were with rugs spread out on the grass on top of the low black cliff of lava rock, wearing our bathing togs, and basking in the sun – with the sparkling blue sea before us and the brilliant white glacier behind us. It seemed incongruous. Who could have imagined an English family sunbathing in such wildly remote surroundings – in Iceland of all places? But we took lots of photographs to prove it – and, to round things off, we climbed down the cliff and plunged into the shining sea (which was a bit of a shock to the systems!)

We went on round the peninsula to Stykkishólmur, on the north coast, and wandered round the pretty little fishing port, looking at the gaily painted boats – and the flaxen-headed children with their little bicycles – and hoping to catch a glimpse of the rare white-tailed eagle. We were making for a valley called Haukadalur, at the head of Breiðafjörður (Broad Firth) in which to pitch our first camp. It was in Haukadalur (Hawk Dale) that Eric the Red had his homestead when he was banished from Iceland for slaying an opponent in about 979 AD – and it was from there that he set out to reconnoitre new lands to the westward, which he called Greenland – and which, in 982 AD, he colonised with 14 ship-loads of emigrant Icelanders (after losing 16 other ship-loads in a storm on the way over). The ruins of Eric's homestead were still to be seen on the northern side of the valley, a little way up the hillside – and I was determined to see them. We pitched our three tents on a grassy plain in the middle of the valley, beside a river – and, after cooking ourselves a good hot supper, we all turned in and bedded down in our sleeping bags for the night – although it was still broad daylight. It was a cold night, and it steadily got colder. It got so cold that we could hardly sleep for shivering. And in the morning there was frost on the ground, and fresh snow on the mountains. It was August 17th – Nicholas's 15th birthday. We were to spend two nights in Haukadalur, so we had all day to celebrate it. But the weather did not help – and when it came to cutting the birthday cake we were all huddled together just inside one of the tents, trying to keep warm.

I had long wanted to visit the southern coast of the North-West Peninsula of Iceland – an area very much 'off the beaten track' due to its relative inaccessibility. Coastal shipping seldom called there – due perhaps to the difficulties of navigating the island and rock-studded Breiðafjörður – and the roads (such as they were) did not lead to anywhere else. So we were breaking new ground as we wended our way north and west along the coast and round the heads of several fjords. We spent at least one night at an isolated little hotel at Bjarkalunda – miles from anywhere – before eventually reaching our destination at the western tip of the Reykjanesfjall peninsula, a little place called Staður. I had often day-dreamed about building a cottage or chalet just there, with superb

uninterrupted views out across Breiðafjörður, to which one could go and relax – and ‘get away from it all’ – and I found the place absolutely captivating. Mary did some lovely watercolour paintings of the view (which I now have framed, in my study), but we could only spend a few hours there. So, for me, Staður remains but a day-dream.

The Land Rover was a veritable godsend, as the roads would frequently disappear into rushing rivers, several feet deep and often very wide, which had to be forded – usually through large semi-submerged boulders. From Bjarkalunda we struck off in a south-easterly direction, more or less into the interior of Iceland, as we were keen to get some fishing. It would be tedious to relate our further meanderings through the west and south-west regions during the last weeks of August – and anyway my memory of those events more than twenty years ago is becoming increasingly hazy. Our plan was to camp for a day or two, then move on and spend the next night in some hotel (to recover from the rigours of life in the open!), then camp again somewhere else – and so on, alternately.

One of the high spots was our stay at the delightful Bifrost hotel, close to the famous Norðura river – which was renowned for its fishing – and from which we spent a day pony-trekking. The Icelandic ponies are hardy little beasts, directly descended from those brought over from Norway by the Vikings – and they have a uniquely peculiar gait, half-way between a trot and a run. They cover the rough ground like this at an amazing pace – but their very odd motion takes a lot of getting used to, for a new rider. Mary (among the least confident of horse-riders) had been given a ‘quiet’ pony – but needless to say it stumbled, and Mary fell off – which did nothing for her confidence, or her morale!

On our way southward, making for Þingvellir, we found the road barred by a gate – with a notice on it in Icelandic which we could not translate. We opened the gate and continued on our way, but a mile or two further on the road disappeared under sand. Sand was no obstacle to a Land Rover in 4-wheel drive, I reckoned, so we pushed on further. But the sand got deeper and deeper, and the prospect ahead looked distinctly ominous. We might have been heading into the Sahara by the looks of things – and I detected signs of nervousness among my passengers. It was foolhardy to press on, so we stopped and got out, to size the situation. After a bit of thought I announced that we would turn around and retrace our tracks – a decision which met with all-round approval. From all, that is, except young Adrian. He looked at me, with scarcely-veiled contempt, and uttered just one word: “Chicken,” he said.

We took another route, and crossed a vast lava-desert marked on the map as Uxahyriggin, from which we got splendid views of the big ice-fields to the south-east – and eventually reached Þingvellir late in the evening. Our immediate need was to find a suitable camp-site – and, just beyond an iron gate, we saw the ideal spot. It was a low grassy hill, quite perfect for our tents. But was it private land? There was no sign of habitation – just a rough track leading on from the gate, so who could tell? We decided to chance our luck. We went in, and pitched our camp on the grassy hill. We’d got the two big tents up, when a car appeared on the track below, and stopped. I ran down the hill and met the occupants of the car – who looked grim. The driver spoke good English. “Was it all right for us to camp up there for one night?” I asked him. “No, it wasn’t” came the reply. No amount of pleading or cajolery from me had any effect. We were kindly to leave his land immediately. I was furious – but we had no alternative. By the time we had struck the tents, packed up and moved, it was 11.00 pm – and getting dark.

We eventually pitched camp near the great rock-rift called Almannagjá, on uneven rocky ground – and lined the floors of our tents with great carpets of soft moss which we stripped off the nearby lava rocks, thus enabling us all to sleep the sleep of the dead (or at least the utterly exhausted). In

the morning I explained the fascinating history and significance of Þingvellir to the family, and read them extracts from some of my guide-books. We went fishing from the banks of a shallow lake. It was a gloriously sunny morning, and we used dry-fly, wet-fly and spinners. Mary, our only expert angler, landed a fair-sized Arctic char – and that was our total bag.

No visit to Iceland would be complete without taking in the famous ‘Golden Falls’ – the great and glorious Gullfoss – and the hot springs and geysirs. So of course we went down there to see them all – and were rewarded with some spectacular ‘eruptions’ from two of the geysirs, Strokkur and Smidur. But few sights are more impressive than Gullfoss (the largest waterfall in Europe), and there we lingered longest.

Our last camp-site was at Þórsmörk, near a ‘forest’ of small birch trees, and close under the lee of the great glacier Eyjafjallajökull – which formed a marvellous glistening backdrop to our camp. On the way there, we stopped for a picnic by a lake full of icebergs – which had calved off from a tongue of the glacier. We pitched our tents high up on a beautiful grassy kind of meadow – as far from civilisation as it is possible to imagine, and with superb views of the magnificent country on all sides. And just behind our camp there was a lovely high waterfall – at Fljotsdalur. I think we spent two nights there – and I remember how exasperating young Adrian was when the time came to strike camp. No amount of chivvying from the rest of the family could persuade him to lend a hand!

We got back to Reykjavik with a day to spare – and I took the opportunity, while the others went shopping, to call on the Icelandic Hydrographer, a delightful man called Pétur Sigurðsson (who was also Head of the Coastguard). He showed me all over his offices where the chart compilation processes were in hand, and explained that one of his problems was a shortage of staff. We discussed our respective families – and when I mentioned that Virginia was expecting to enter university, Pétur Sigurðsson – to my surprise – said that if she was not successful, or had time to fill in while waiting, he could offer her a post as a cartographic draughtsman! I was astonished that he was able to employ foreign workers in a Government office – but he assured me that that was no problem. I was grateful for the offer, and said that we would certainly consider it if the occasion arose.

Having bought heaps of presents to take home, including an Icelandic sweater for each of us, we embarked once more in the same splendid ship that had brought us up there, and regretfully sailed for home. It had been a marvellous holiday for all of us – and we felt all the better for all the sun and fresh air, and for the weeks of close camaraderie that we had enjoyed together. The voyage back to Leith was calm and uneventful, and we arrived on the last day of August, just in time to witness the last night’s performance of the annual Edinburgh Military Tattoo!

Back at home, Virginia received word from York University that it could offer her a place – but not until the autumn of 1965. She had left school, so now had a whole year to fill in. What should she do? Naturally, we considered the Icelandic offer – and after much discussion decided that we should accept it, for a period of six months. Old English would be a part of her studies at university, and a working knowledge of Icelandic (Old Norse – a root of Old English) would be an advantage to her. When I got back to the Admiralty I was able to arrange for Virginia to be taken on by Chart Branch at Cricklewood as a trainee draughtswoman for three months – so that she would be an asset to Pétur Sigurðsson when she got to Reykjavik, rather than an immediate liability.