

A Trip to Tallinn

The Diary

To an English person, Estonia is probably not the number one venue for a November break. To answer the usual first question, it is on the south side of the Baltic, a long way east – opposite Finland, beyond Poland (and even a bit of Russia). It was part of the USSR for a long time, and has only been independent for two years or so. Tallinn is its major city – in fact a third of the country's population live there. We went because Elaine had a work conference there, and we tacked a couple of days holiday onto the front of that.

Saturday November 5th

Getting there takes two flights. The first, as far as Schipol (Amsterdam) left Newcastle at 6.00 am, which meant getting up at 3.45 am, which not only feels like but is the middle of the night. Took my customary half bottle of red wine (prescribed by the Doctor in lieu of sedatives to kerb my fear of the wholly-unnatural activity of flying) in the pre-dawn blackness, which itself felt pretty unnatural. But, in combination with adrenalin, it did appear to fuel mental processes; at the end of the two flights the pencilled scribbles in the notebook I was clutching included segments of no less than four new songs. At the same time it has to be admitted that on the first flight I had managed to pour my free plastic cup of orange juice down my trouser leg (with the result that I had to live with a swilling shoe-full all day), and on the second I had pressed a red button (admittedly placed adjacent to the soap dispenser in the loo) a second before seeing it was labelled 'EMERGENCY SUMMON CABIN CREW'¹, to ring bells the full length of the aircraft.

We took off in pitch dark, but once up there was a faint glow of dawn on the eastern horizon, with the sun appearing just as we landed at the vast and labyrinthine Schipol airport. The second leg was largely above cloud, after a brief glimpse of Denmark – flat fields dotted with endless white wind turbines – and its the Baltic coast. After a couple of hours droning through sunlit space, we plunged down into the white blanket beneath, which swiftly became murk. There was only time for a brief glimpse of regimented fields and whitewashed concrete buildings before we touched down at Tallinn, and taxied up to the single air terminal building – a far cry from Schipol. It was grey, raining, with visibility two or three hundred yards; a big metal fence surrounded the airport, with lots of building sites beyond. It was, I am afraid, just what one imagined Estonia would look like. The three or four mile taxi ride into town did not dispel the illusion either – lots of institutional-looking buildings in a grey-green rather rotten-looking limestone, all very 50s and drab; lots of painted signs (often accompanied by big arrows) simply saying 'ALKOHOL' pointed to one human response to this bleakness. It got more modern and upmarket towards the hotel, which was fine if soul-less. By now it was a little after mid-day Estonian time (two hours ahead of England) but felt a lot later – a struggle to keep awake.

¹ This had a less drastic effect than one might have feared; the cabin crew were quite unperturbed, and in fact three more people made the same mistake within the next half hour

Into town from the hotel most things are very new and international, with some long and frightening pedestrian crossings spanning multi-lane highways – however, as in Sweden, the drivers seemed quite well behaved. Beyond was the old city, at first 19th century buildings, but then came the towering city walls, and everything changes to a warren of cobbled streets with lots of medieval buildings – moulded Gothic doorways and archways into yards everywhere, tall gabled fronts with pitching doors high up and projecting beams for hoists and then the central square, a little like Brussels, with a 15th-century town hall. Everything is highly picturesque, and does not feel over-restored. Some gables have arched panels, a bit like Bruges (and Malmo). We looked round a Museum of Estonian History in a splendid twin-naved guildhall dated ‘1407’; helpfully, every exhibit was labelled in both English and Estonian; it had a splendid lion’s-head doorknocker (left) a bit like that at Durham Cathedral. There is a lot of English around in fact- at the airport it seemed the dominant language – but in the city it sometimes appears in a vernacularised form, such as the delightful sign ‘Irish Pubi’; one can Estonianise many words by simply adding an ‘i’. Another museum, in a Dominican Friary, was sadly closed (although signs said that winter visits could be made by appointment); a lot of the medieval building clearly survives, with one lane running adjacent to the south wall of the church, which has a row of big late medieval tomb slabs (mostly with inscriptions and heraldry) fixed to it, with nocturnal side-lighting installed. Tallin is not backward in its care for antiquities.

The old city divides itself into the Upper Town, the hill-top of Toompea, below which the Lower Town extends to the north and east; the overall length north-south is around 1 km. Above two third of the walls survive, with 26 of an original 46 towers; the towers vary in size, but are almost all round, with (restored) conical roofs of red tile.

A word on history. This is a medieval town, but medieval started here a bit later than in England. It began with the Danes arriving in the early 1200s, when the locals were still pagan, and still really in the Iron Age. The hill of Toompea was already some sort of fortress ; a new city was established and walled round (the locals made several unsuccessful attempts to get it back) and became a place of rich merchants, with guilds and various knightly bodies running things – for a while the Order of the Knights of the Sword ran things, and later on bodies like the Livonian Order and Brotherhood of Blackheads were dominant, who had wonderful ceremonies like the annual parrot-shooting.²

Back to the hotel and a couple of hours rest to ensure we survived until the evening, then out again – still the persistent light rain – to seek food, through streets heaving with local youth although, in the old city, thankfully car-free (there is a ‘congestion charge’ of 25 kroons³, around £1.25, which seems remarkably effective). Found a slightly bizarre but really good Indian restaurant, which offered ‘wild curries’ (eg ‘moose korma, ‘wild boar vindaloo’) which played techno music and was certainly on the reasonable side of English prices.

2 If this all sounds, to Pratchett devotees, a bit Ankh-Morporkian, you are right. Only a wooden parrot got shot (with a bow-and-arrow); to tell the truth there are not many native parrots in Estonia. The winner received a silver one (it is now in the treasury at St Nicholas’ Church) and the right to call himself ‘king’ for a year.

3 Abbreviated to EEKs (think GBPs) which sounds like a currency suited to mice, or the very nervous. 100 sents makes up a kroon. Coins are 10, 20 and 50 sents, then 1 and 5 kroons; upwards of that come notes.

Then back to bed where somnolence, despite a half-century of a day, posed a problem, as we discovered that the room was sited directly beneath the hotel Jacuzzi. Thus thunderous watery noises, and the squelches and squeaks of what sounded like elephantine human flesh on porcelain, just went on and on. Elaine had usefully packed ear plugs, but even these did not help. There were even bursts of communal song⁴. Whatever the eight or ten doughty Estonians above were actually doing, tired minds below eventually boggled themselves to sleep.

Sunday

Breakfast offered enough choice to suit all European tastes, although the clientele – with a high proportion of loud English-speaking young males – did not make it all that pleasant an experience. But early morning grey turned, surprisingly, to blue skies and sunshine, and we rapidly sallied forth into the old city. First, through an old gateway and up a steep street to the rock of Toompea, crowned by the Castle and the Parliament Buildings, and the spectacular Russian Orthodox Cathedral, only built in 1900, and, one gathers, still resented by many locals. This is where the Orthodox East laps against Gothic (and Lutheran) Europe, although the tide has once more receded. A service was in progress, but people were both coming and going in considerable numbers, as is apparently the Orthodox way. Outside stood a queue of sad and decayed old ladies clutching plastic begging boxes, optimistically awaiting the exit of those in a State of Grace. Inside all is soaring space, a thousand flickering candles and tapers, and dimly glittering gold and ikons. The service was in what seemed in effect the south aisle (although the building is centrally planned, square, with four huge piers carrying the central dome). Several robed clergy, all male and deep-voiced, appeared and disappeared through a pair of doors which allowed periodic glimpses into some inner sanctum. They swung censers and showed various items to the congregation; their voices were set against an angelic choir (whom we could not see) but of course everything was in Russian and quite unintelligible to us. There was constant movement, at least in the rear section of the crowd, people coming and going, or pushing through to light candles at various shrines and ikons⁵; every few seconds everyone crossed themselves, so frequently and vigorously that the service must have constituted a week's worth of aerobic exercise.

After half an hour we joined the outflowing section of the crowd, and then headed off up a cobbled street, discussing what we had seen. I want to be ecumenical, broad and tolerant, but the western Protestant in me cannot avoid thinking that the service at least gave the appearance of a small and very male elite performing mysterious rituals that we, the peasants, were only worthy to glimpse from a distance, the Old Testament come back to reclaim the New⁶.

The Upper Town is well supplied with medieval churches; passing another one, which

4 Estonia is a great country for folk song; it was the 'Singing Revolution' that finally drove out the Russians, when one in three Estonians descended on Tallinn to sing previously-banned national songs. New Labour take note! However, one cannot help but recall the dreadful film of a few years ago, 'Mars Attacks' where Americans discovered that playing country-and-western to the invading Martians caused their heads to explode.

5 One was of a bearded and balding cleric who looked just like Rowan Williams, our own Archbishop of Canterbury; was this an intentional piece of ecumenical outreach across the great East/West divide?

6 Elaine commented that they needed a Reformation, but got a Revolution instead.

styled itself Evangelical Lutheran, we found a viewpoint looking out across the railway station and industrial suburbs to the west, and a spectacular prospect of the Lower Town to the north, with a superb line of towers on the western wall, and the mighty spire of St Olaf's Church soaring beyond them. To get down one descends the Patkul Staircase (of 1903) zig-zagging down the face of the rock, pausing to fraternise with an exceedingly-friendly black-and-white cat on the way. At the bottom we found a café, and suddenly felt how small today's world is, because the toilet paper in the loo was by Kimberley Clarke's of Prudhoe! So with knowledge like this, even the simplest physical actions can give a warm glow of homely feeling. Then, under fast-greying skies, it was up onto an accessible length of city wall (three tower's worth) with lots of dark and twisting stairs and a reconstructed wooden gallery along the inner face. Beyond this houses have been built into the wall, but an open park along the outside face provides spectacular views of tower after tower, and then a gap allows access to a lane on the inside, with more of the arched recesses we saw yesterday on the eastern defences. On the other side was a small church (which we later found to be Ukrainian Orthodox) dedicated to the Virgin with Three Hands, the patron saint of the unjustly accused, who were invited to post prayers through a small letter box.....

At the acute northern angle of the defences is a great artillery bastion, 'Stout Margaret' (1529) now an Estonian Naval Museum, with a much-restored gateway alongside. Just inside is St Olaf's Church, with a spire that at one stage claimed to be the highest in the world; the present one (19th century) reaches 124 m, and a couple of decades ago served as a surveillance centre for the KGB. The church now houses a Baptist congregation; a service was in progress, and, as at the Orthodox Cathedral, people seemed to be coming and going. We sneaked into the gallery, and promptly got told off (in Estonian) by someone who thought we were the parents of some disruptive infants... Here the service, if not the language, was as familiar as the Orthodox one had been unfamiliar. Worship band, overhead projector, sixtyish man in suit giving sermon. In the entrance lobby was a shop selling books that, at least in part, seemed translations of American originals⁷; we tried to communicate with the lady behind the counter but she did not understand English. Later on we heard a heartening story about the church; under the communists the resident Lutherans had been moved out and the decaying building was given to a group of seven different Baptist congregations, apparently with the expectation that they would argue amongst themselves (as small evangelical groups tend to) and the building decline further. However, the Baptists united and restored the church as well, so the high altar (with its electric-powered candles) and Crucifixion painting/eredos, as well as the Lutheran pulpit, all remain intact if not actually in use⁸.

Then south down Lai, a broad street with some fine trees and wonderfully picturesque gable-fronted medieval houses, to lunch in a market-place café, and a brief trip to a photography museum, with loads of old bellows cameras, in a medieval prison, all little vaulted rooms and winding mural stairs. Then, for the third time, to church; this time round to an advertised English service, in a Lutheran church – again in a fine medieval building (Church of the Holy Spirit), twin-naved and vaulted with excellent

7 The danger for Baptists and other evangelical groups is perhaps that the USA can become their Vatican; maybe one day a reformation will be needed here as well.

8 Actually the exterior still looks pretty scruffy. Later in the week we made three or four attempts to visit, but it was always locked; the town guide simply gives its opening hours as the service times.

17th-century timber galleries at the sides. Elaine got to read both lessons – the service was very Anglican and formal, but we got coffee and biscuits afterwards and some friendly chat.

Back to the hotel for a doze, then into the Old Town yet again for a meal at an Estonian restaurant, with a man on an accordion providing ethnic music⁹. The walls were painted with Estonian proverbs and their English translations (‘No mouse runs into sleeping cat’s mouth’); we ate things like blood sausages and sea buckthorn berries, and PFR crunched his way through a whole plateful of garlic cloves. No need to fear vampires tonight!

Monday

No vampires, but at 5.13 am there was what sounded like, not far away, a battleship delivering a broadside, the regular intervals between the ten explosions suggests that it was something that was intentional, rather than civil insurrection, but nevertheless, rather antisocial at this hour. In retrospect, it was probably something to do with the one of the vast new building sites nearby. Breakfast more pleasant this morning, then a bus ride five miles north-east along the coast to Pirita. The attraction here was the ruins of a Bridgettine Abbey. Big gable ends are a feature of the medieval architecture hereabouts, and none bigger than the west end of the church, a huge triangle of a wall that not surprisingly served as a seamark. The shell of the rest of the church – an eight-bay fully aisled rectangle – stands, but not the east gable, nor the arcades. The whole building was vaulted at the level of the eaves of the side walls, but the roof-space above (there was no clerestory) rose as high again. There must have been some amazing timber structure to carry it all. This was a double monastery – monks and nuns – and there were separate cloisters, monks on the south and nuns on the north; there were also a number of sunken rooms which the plan on the wall called ‘hypocausts’. In England hypocausts are always Roman; these seem to be allied to saunas (in that each contained lots of big rounded stones, which one presumes were heated up) but there were various ducts and openings to carry the hot air to the rooms above. They probably needed it – I realised that this was the most northerly ground I had ever trodden.

After lunch in a local bar, we walked back along the coast to Tallin, passing some interesting modern concrete sculpture and a c1900 memorial to a lost Russian ship – a big angel clutching an Orthodox cross – and then some interesting suburbs with 19th or early 20th century timber houses (left), and even a timber Orthodox church. At one point we saw a huge brand new church with a gleaming metal spire and a whole complex of buildings attached, all very avant garde; we guessed it might be the Mormons¹⁰

We eventually arrived at the north gate of the Old Town; after coffee and cake were visited the Ancient Monuments Office in the main Square, and were hospitably received, and allowed to copy plans of old Tallin and the Dominican Friary. Then to

9 We recognised the Estonian originals of ‘Whisky in the Jar’ and ‘Seth Davey’ and several tunes reminiscent of the works of George Formby, whose Baltic Coast origins remained a well-kept secret to his UK fans.

10 But were wrong. Later in the Architectural Museum I found out that it wasMethodist!. This is a strange country.

the hotel again, to meet Elaine's team, and back to the Old Town one again for a brief concert of Classical song in the Church of the Holy Spirit; good voices, lovely setting but the material failed to stir. And an evening meal in the Hotel, posh but paltry.

Tuesday

Slept well for once, and breakfasted quite respectably. Elaine's course begins today, so I determined to do some work, and sit in Estonia with my head full of Yorkshire Dales villages. But no sooner than I had arrived (by dint of intense thinking) in Thornton Rust, than an unexpected and slightly nightmarish encounter took place. Sitting by the window at the laptop computer, I became aware I was being watched, turned and saw, perhaps 50 cm away, through the open window a seagull of near-albatrossian proportions, fixing me with its beady eye. My first thought was to take its picture, and my second that I had retrieved a bread bun from breakfast, with the intention of mid-morning repast. So I fetched the bun, and offered a piece to the gull, which took it in a fairly civilised manner. So far so good; I sacrificed the whole bun for the sake of human/avian relations, but it then dawned on me that fraternisation with Eastern European birds might not be wise. It might have bird flu. So I shut the window. The gull tapped on the glass with its beak., and watched me. I worried. It banged on the glass, and I noticed a scatter of water droplets. It was salivating! Do healthy birds dribble? I fled to the bathroom, and, for want of anything better to do, washed my hands, then breathed out, hard, in one corner of the room before breathing in again, in the other. Thankfully the bird departed. I sat, feeling vaguely feverish; am I getting a sore throat?

Still alive by 11.00 am, and the sun coming out, so sketch-book-in-hand, I sallied into the old city yet again. First of all up the steps of Short Leg to Toompea, the Upper Town. Apart from the shell of the Dome Church (the Lutheran Cathedral) and the outer walls of the Castle there is little medieval up here, as they had a big fire in the 1600s; however there are lots of picturesque colour-washed late 17th and 18th century houses, with winding lanes between them along which visitors can gain various viewpoints looking out over the world below. The Dome Church was open, and was interesting but largely post-medieval; at the door were a frightening series of pidgin-English notices NO PHOTOGRAPHING! NO FILMING! NO SPEAKING! NO EATING! accompanied by (separate) artistic depictions of each activity slashed through by a red diagonal. Just off the entrance porch, away from the eye of the custodian, was a monument with a lovely marble lion on top, so I waited my moment – but every time I was about to whip the camera out of the plastic bag, one door or the other would open and some visitor shuffled through, so I had to rapidly pretend to be sketching. In the end I got my chance. Then out to the wonderful vista from the top of the Patkul Staircase, where I did a real sketch. More wandering round the marvellous streets below, and photographing things a second time round in much better light, and then it was time for an assault on the Dominican Friary. Attempts to get in by getting the hotel staff to phone up had failed – access was only possible to parties, and whilst they did have a party going round they were sure that the said party would resent an additional member... this place does seem to have a tendency, perhaps inherited from its Soviet days, at being unhelpfully authoritarian. However, I found a restaurant that had a door into the site, and a waitress who understood English – I explained my plight, my craving to inspect friaries etc etc and she found a key and let me in 'if I didn't mind the ghosts'; the ghosts and I had a very satisfying half hour

together, although all you can get into is the cloister, with its vaulted east and west walks. Any other buildings, like the chapter house, must be entered from elsewhere; the site of the church seems to be covered by later buildings. Lots of very fine carved stones are displayed on the walls, but my especial interest (at home) is in cross-slabs, and there seems to be no hide nor hair of these here. The medievals here were very keen on their coat of arms, which always seems to be the main motif on a grave slab; I suppose they felt they needed to show them to St Peter to demonstrate their connections.

Lunch in a modern department store (when I sneezed twice, and remembered the seagull) and then a final walk, right round the outside of the west side of the old city, from south to north. There are a continuous line of parks here, with what seem to be two huge ditches (the outer with a string of lakes) winding round the foot of the rock. From the inside all one sees of Toompea Castle is 19th and 20th century administrative buildings, but from here it looks superb, a great embattled cliff of medieval walling, with a skyscraper of a round tower at the south-west corner (left). Further on, some glorious late sun on the final run of towers near St Olaf's church, their conical roofs incandescent orange against the dark sky. Discovered what looks like a medieval barn containing a 'Museum of Mines' (not holes in the ground but the bang-when-you sail-into-them sort). Maybe a treat for tomorrow?.

In the evening went out with Elaine's team for a medieval banquet, in a big heavily-restored merchant's house just off the central square, which has canned bagpipe music blaring out all day, and candles/torches on either side of the door that flare so high the whole wall above is sooted. It wasn't half as bad as it might have been; we were served by jolly medieval Estonians whose English was really pretty good, with only the occasional surreal turn of phrase. Only avowed teetotallers could escape the introductory 'Monk's Bride', a throat-burner with a vaguely medicinal taste; I suppose stuff like this is useful if you have a desperate desire to forget things fast, or perhaps to light a fire with damp wood. Thereafter there were lots of things you could not really recognise in the dim candlelight¹¹ but were generally quite acceptable, unless it was that the initial draught had slurred ones perceptions. The meat and fish only came at the end, and by the time the wooden bowl had made its way along the table there was only a mini-gobbet of wild boar left in the bottom. But to be honest I am happier to think of them rooting about in forests rather than reduced to gravied lumps on plates.

Wednesday

An educational mostly-museums day, dry but the skies heavy and grey. First to an Architectural Museum, which turned out to be no more than a slalom around display boards in a basement – nevertheless it was only 5 eeks, and pretty informative. Then, I gave the Mine Museum I had planned to visit a wide berth¹² and wandered back through the Lower Town to St Nicholas Church, in the shadow of Toompea, with a tower and spire that almost but not quite rivals St Olafs. It now doubles as a concert hall and museum of medieval art, and has an elaborate modern entry that entails

11 Onions, turnips, barley were all present in ways one would not normally encounter them.

12 On the grounds that it might present an unwise temptation to the flesh; I am a compulsive collector, and really interesting collections fire me to start my own, which might not be wise as they are probably rather expensive, and might also, I fear, lead to domestic tensions..

subterranean cloak rooms. Inside are some huge, and I mean huge, 16th or 17th century limestone gravestones with the usual coats of arms and inscriptions, and occasionally low-relief effigies; amongst the art my favourite was a superb 15th-century Dance Macabre with Death playing the bagpipes (right) and a cartoon-like black-letter dialogue beneath between him and a Pope, a King and a Cardinal. ‘Times up, lad’ ‘Woe is me, even though I am the Pope that hasn’t helped me!’, that sort of thing, but put with a bit more style. The church itself is a soaring Gothic structure with the usual apse and various side chapels; it all looks very authentic, but there are photographs showing it after Russian bombing in 1944 when only the tower and outer walls survived, and again after a fire in 1980s with the half-melted spire spectacularly drooping down the side of the tower, like a birthday-cake candle that overheated, and part of the roofs gone.

Light lunch in a subterranean café, then to Kiek in de Kok, a massive circular tower at the south end of the defences, which now stands clear of the walls. The name translates as ‘Peep into the Kitchen’; the story is that the tower was so tall you could apparently see down other peoples’ chimneys from the top. It is now a museum; you enter at ground level, go down steps into the basement, then discover there is a full storey still to go below, as well as six above; it got partly submerged in later earthworks. All pretty impressive, but unfortunately the fifth floor, with a big model of medieval Tallin, was locked. On the floor below was a custodian, the sort that sit in corners waiting for visitors to misbehave¹³. I asked her why the display upstairs was closed. ‘Closed?’; it was not a word she knew; an assistant appeared, but didn’t know it either. I kept trying. Suddenly their eyes lit up ‘Toilet! You want Toilet!’ they chorused and all but frogmarched me downstairs. I gave up.

Finally, and fittingly under leaden skies, the new Museum of Occupation, well designed and quite interactive. Until little more than a decade ago Estonia suffered half a century of engulfment within the USSR, with a short Nazi interlude near the start, all this was recounted in great detail with lots of artefacts from the everyday trivia to police bugging kits, and a rusty Moskvitch to show how bad Russian cars could be. I sat and listened to videos of survivors (usefully overdubbed; you can choose English at the click of a mouse) but then a tidal wave of elderly locals came in and had a noisy nostalge-fest (‘Look, our Ivan had one of those when he was in the KGB!’) and I had to give up for a while. One slight surprise was that the Nazis almost seemed good guys, welcomed by cheering crowds as they drove out the Reds; the nastinesses chronicled all seemed communist ones. All history is always spun to some extent (think England and Ireland...).

Galleried out. Trudged back through the early evening dusk through crowds of Estonians now worshipping at the shrine of Mammon¹⁴ rather than Lenin. Democracy has got to be better than the other, but you can never quite escape the skull behind the smile; there is an element of *danse macabre* about the whole place. As well as the glitter and shopping malls, there are depressing numbers of casinos (apparently tacitly run by the Mafia, who have come to some sort of compromise with the police) and everywhere clubs for the traditional male pursuits of ogling undressed women and drinking industrial-strength alcohol; there are virtually standpipes for the stuff on

13 And for some reason usually snuffle or wheeze. I thought of the seagull again.

14 We were told that at Independence people flocked back to the churches, but only very briefly – then they turned their attention to the serious business of making money.

street corners, under red neon ALKO signs..

Back to the Estonian Restaurant for the evening meal, mostly porky things and traditional Tallinn firewater (managed only a sip of someone else's...); afterwards everyone had a walk to the Upper Town, from which there were impressive views down, with various churches and the Town Hall (but not the walls) floodlit.

Thursday

Just time in the morning for one more museum, Tallinn City Museum (17 Vene Street); the museum itself was pretty good, but my main interest was to learn more about the 15th century merchants' houses which are such a feature of the town. This one had been altered (it had lost its gable and upper floors) but what remained was very instructive; there was also an excellent reconstruction model of a similar house elsewhere in the town, to fill in the gaps. A brief description seems in order. One enters from the street by ascending a stone stair to the central Gothic-arched doorway, flanked at its foot by a pair of shaped carved slabs known as porch stones. The doorway, flanked by big mullioned-and-transomed windows, opens into a hall, the *diele*, which was used for business and as a workroom. It was heated by a big corner fireplace, with a stone pier (the cap helpfully carved '1503') at its external angle. A newel stair led upwards (here superseded by a big wooden one leading up to a gallery, which all went in when the house was remodelled in the early 18th century inserted gallery) and a door led into the living room, which had a stair (with good carved doorway, dated '1513' this time) down to the basement. The basement was important¹⁵; it contained the treasury (treasure obviously being important to the owners) and also a hypocaust, a brick hearth in which big cobbles were heated, once they were actually hot, a vent was opened so that hot air (but not smoke) could rise to the living room, through a slab pierced with round holes rebated for covers. The close-set beams of the basement ceiling carried the stone slab floor of the diele. Upstairs there may have been a solar over the living room; everything else, and the house might go up for three or four floors, was stores, brought into the building by a series of high-level doors in the centre of the front elevation, using a hoist and pulley in the gable; the pulley beam (sometimes under a canopy) often survives. All in all, quite a sophisticated residence, and ahead of most English houses of the 15th century. The whole city seems to have been rebuilt at this time, in stone to avoid the risk of fire, and provided with paved roads and sewers as well.

Then back to gather our belongings from the hotel, and a brief scurry around trying to find the right bus stop for the no 2 to the airport; out again from the shiny new centre through the building site zone and then the mid-20th century miseries -grey flats and crumbling wooden houses, before they gave way to the new Estonian again of sprawling business parks, and the airport.

Journey back uneventful, except of course I still profoundly distrust aeroplanes. Mostly cloudy beneath; stared out of window willing the wings to stay on. Night fell during our two hour wait at Skipol, than a final hour or so back to Newcastle, breezy but dry.

¹⁵ Unfortunately the one here is not open to the public, but we had seen a similar one on Monday in the house at the corner of the main square, occupied by the Ancient Monuments people.

