I love England! As an American I feel very comfortable there. Perhaps it’s because my family on my mother’s side, the Pophams, goes back to mid 12th century there. (That was a mere 800 years after the Romans left.) So it’s no wonder that my favorite vacation destination is anywhere in the British Isles.

These past two years Cathy and I have been timing our English vacations to land around the 4th of July. Why would we wish to celebrate the Fourth in Merry Olde England? So we can take in what is probably the biggest and best kite festival in England, the Sunderland International Friendship Festival. (And the fireworks in the USA have become so “been there, done that.”)

The Sunderland Festival is purposely held one the weekend nearest July 4 mainly because it is held in the town of Washington, UK, the British home of the Washington family from whence came George Washington, our first president. On the 4th of July the town of Washington holds a celebration to commemorate the founding of America. To be sure, it’s a rather sedate affair, nothing like a raucous Guy Fawke’s Day blowout. But I think it’s sweet for the Brits to pay a bit of homage to those upstart Yanks.

The Sunderland Friendship Festival, on the other hand, is a well organized affair of grand scale. It was started 23 years ago by Nissan which built an auto manufacturing plant in Sunderland, and wanted to do something to make their Japanese workers feel comfortable. It has grown over the years to include live music performances, food courts, vendor stalls, street performers dressed as aliens or talking potted plants (I’m not making this up), and three very large flying fields for invited kite-flying guests.

The invitees are indeed international. They do include some from Japan, but also France, Germany, Israel, India, Australia (Tasmania, actually), and of course America, which is where I come in. The Wings Over Washington Kite Club receives a special invitation to the festival. Washington, DC, and Washington, UK, are sister cities, it turns out, and the organizers want a kiter to specifically represent Washington, DC, at the festival. As a member of WOW I accepted the invitation and was, frankly, treated as a VIP.

The Northern English weather in July can be iffy. Last year the festival cancelled an entire day due to heavy rain. This year’s festival went the full weekend, but Goretex was still my favorite friend. The rain came, the rain went, then it came back, but we were stalwart and flew throughout the day. A lot of my flying was done with Stephen Hoath and the Flying Squad. This group of quad-line fliers are the English answer to John Barresi and iQuad. They were happy to see me, and let me fly team with them, but they were especially happy to see the 20th Anniversary Revolution progressive stack when I pulled it out of my bag. The English Rev fliers treated that kite with nothing less than reverence.

Pauline Taylor of Infinite Arts in Sunderland, the principal organizer of the kite festival, was also pleased to see my latest single-line creations come out of the bag. I divided my time between the quad-line field and the art kite field, where I flew with such dignitaries as Martin Lester and Robert Brasington. There were plenty of artsy kites up in the air (between rain showers), but perhaps the height of artsyness came when all the quad fliers flew a mass assencion of Robert Trapanier’s famous quad art. I flew Kisa Sauer’s own somersaulting clown, and made sure to make it spin as intended. There were also mass assentions of butterflies and angels.

Sunday’s weather was slightly less hostile than Saturday’s, and the sun even came out for a short minute. Fortified with waterproof shoes, a Goretex rain suit and a wonderful lunch with the City Mayor in the VIP tent (international representatives do have certain privileges now, don’t they) I flew ballets with the Rev stack for most of the afternoon in the central demonstration field. The wind was clinical, even if a bit moist, and the audience appreciative, even if a bit sparse due to the rain.

One thing immediately apparent to a Yankee kiter is that the Brits do festivals so differently. There are no competitions, just kiters and artists interested in showing off their stuff and seeing other’s stuff. There will
always be a hospitality tent for tea and refreshments. It’s all so “civilized,” or as the Brits would say, “civilised.” I found it rather relaxing and well worth the travel. So I say, “Thank you,” to Pauline Taylor and her staff for their excellent organization, hospitality, and truly fun time at the Sunderland International Friendship Festival. I hope to see you again at a future festival, preferably one without the liquid English sunshine.

Artsy Edos in multitude.
There were several great looking stars.

The Flying Squad doing their thing.
Some angels flying about.
Butterflies everywhere.

This year a ceremonial kite was instituted. The first signature is the Mayor’s, the second is the representative of Washington, DC, yours truly.
Ceremonial kite in flight.

Camp Martin Lester.
Strange wind art is the norm here.

This talking potted plant was the greeter at the VIP tent.
Trapanier's somersaulting clown.