

The Isle of Wight – and More

by JaneW

The Meady Countdown: Wednesday 19th September:

I have been here, there and everywhere, following Lee this year. I can't recall having so much fun in my life before. Mind you – the Isle of Wight? That's a long, long, long way! But here's the thing: with the travelling fans, I knew, with a little from my friends we can work it out and get me to Newport.

"I'm going to drive my car down to the ferry port," said my friend "So you don't need to get to the Isle of Wight, just to me."

Now it's Wednesday – in just eight days, a week tomorrow, I will heading off to hers. Ooo it won't be long now!

The Meady Countdown: Thursday 27th September

I'm struggling not to nod off! I'm only sleeping about six hours a night at the moment and I'm so tired. Other than that, I feel fine.

My broken toe is all but healed. Still I have been careful with my footwear. It's safely encased in an old brown shoe which ought to give it some protection. Don't let me down, little toe!

I'm currently sitting in the grounds of a very impressive church, waiting for my kind hostess. My train got me in way too early really, but it's no hardship sitting on the grass with my book. Weather-wise it's been such a good day. Sunshine is pouring down on me.

Bit of a funny story to share with you...

I'd had a very pleasant time wandering through town, until I found this magnificent church. Having loads of time on my hands, I decided to have a good nosey around it. While I was in there I noticed that part of the nave had been converted into a café. People were sitting inside with cups of tea.

Now bear in mind I am carting around a rucksack, my handbag and a little bag for taking into the theatres, so the idea of parking my bum for a bit and enjoying a cuppa was more than usually appealing.

I pushed open the café door.

That's when I realised that all the customers sat at one table – and crucially the serving hatch was closed.

All eyes turned to me with polite but curious glances.

"Errr, I umm err...was after a cup of tea. Is this a café?"

"Yes. It's closed at the moment. We've just finished our bible study group. You are welcome to come and have a cup of tea with us."

"Oh err...that would be lovely."

So I pulled up a chair and a chap put the kettle on, and very soon I was sitting sipping tea and chatting with a group of perfect strangers. Well you know me. I chatter!

The group have gone their separate ways now, so I'm down on the grass, having a bit of time to chill out with my book.

Ooo text: She's leaving home any minute now. I'd better get to our rendez-vous.

Ferry across the Solent: Friday 28th September

We had a very pleasant evening together. I now have a new sausage and veg recipe. Yum!

After a quick breakfast the two of us hit the long and winding road to Portsmouth, there to meet with the third of our little gang.

The last won't be joining us until after work. As she's a foot passenger she's got a ticket to Ryde. Apparently, there's a good bus service though so she shouldn't have any problem getting to Newport.

We had such nice trip, sitting on deck in fresh sea air, with the sun still glorious. I have a shedload of pictures of Portsmouth from the sea (some of which are actually in focus).

Mind you the photos we took from our hotel windows were pretty good too!

We've had a walk up to the theatre. It's a really lovely walk too, through a park, beside the river. Mind you I am a bit uncertain about returning that way in the dark. If I fell I could do more damage to my toe. Tee hee! I wonder what my friends would say if I told them "I want to hold your hand!"

As we neared the theatre we passed John, evidently heading to the sound check, along with a young man we didn't recognise. Sound technician we wondered? And a minute later two more of the regulars appeared, and we stood catching up in the car park. They weren't staying over-night on the island but would be day trippers. From the theatre the beat of Ian's drums drifted. We heard Meady's voice briefly but couldn't even make out what song he was singing. Still it was fun trying to guess!

Back at the hotel, or rather the pub next to it, we ordered dinner. As we finished off halloumi fries the last of my pals arrived. Hurrah! Our little gang is complete!

The Show goes on

The Medina theatre is quite an unusual venue. To begin with it's part of a school, or in the grounds of a school – a bit like the theatre in Yarm. In the second place it's a proper amphitheatre. We were surprised by the lack of a raised stage. Instead the seats are arranged on a steep rake looking down on the performers. Even from my seat in row C my view looked slightly down on Mr Mead...but I'm getting ahead of myself. He's not on stage yet. The audience are still filtering in.

I keep wanting to say "to this little theatre" The theatre isn't really that small. The amphitheatre set up keeps it compact, but its capacity is deceptive. Lee's audience didn't manage to fill it by any means but nevertheless plenty gathered there to enjoy Meadiness.

I know how lucky I am. So many fans, many from overseas, who'd love to be here. Several Irish friends, and one Norwegian would be there like a shot if they could.

I need to explain a bit about my seat.

Having decided to join my friends for this show rather late in the day, I wasn't sat with them but a little further back. My original seat was quite far away from them, right at the side of the auditorium, but handily a few returns came on sale a couple of weeks beforehand, so I bought an upgrade – row C, close to the centre. From there I could at least see my mates and exchange the odd thumbs up.

Beside me, and in front of me, two pairs of seats remained unclaimed - even as the house lights dimmed and Adam played the opening bars of 'Pure Imagination'.

Hmmm. I had a dilemma. I'm sort of exposed in the middle of the empty seats. There's no more than a handful of regulars in the audience and I'm not sat amongst them. Do I tone down my normal exuberant whooping?

Lee took the stage. Oh my, so very handsome in his tux. I took a deep breath.

"Whoop whoop whoop!"

The young woman next to me was outdoing me in the whooping stakes. OK fair enough – I let rip!

Now and then I find myself with a neighbour like that. I love it when it happens. Her extraordinary enthusiasm buoyed me up even more than is normal for a Meady gig. She loved everything: she sighed over 'Pure Imagination', guffawed at his 'Dancing Thru Life', and was utterly entranced by 'From Now On'. I don't think I have ever been so out classed in Meady fervour as with the lass next to me.

Even at interval my friends told me they could hear my whooping – "Not mine!" I said.

Mr Mead himself was quite delighted with the crowd. We might not have filled the auditorium but he was very happy to see so many of us. I can only assume he'd not checked the ticket sales recently and didn't realise there'd been a fair few in lately.

He had lots of nice things to say about the Isle of Wight in general, though he was a bit nonplussed about the theatre itself. He made a great deal of play about craning up to see his audience.

Band intros - and this time Ian his drummer took the limelight. I'd mentioned that the Medina Theatre is part of a school, turns out it was Ian's school. Mr Mead's dressing room was the music room where Ian learned his craft. The audience was of course made up to have one of their own on stage, but they showed appropriate appreciation for the rest of the band too – Adam, Richie, John and Tim. Yep, Tim. The lad we'd seen with John earlier. He was standing in for Tommy for the weekend while Tommy did a somewhat more important job – looking after his newborn baby. Awwww!

The set list for part one had stayed pretty much the same since his last 10 Year anniversary concert in July. His confidence now as he delivers each song is a joy to see. And with an

evening punctuated by his stories and occasional impression (his Ken Dodd is hysterical, as is his Mick Jagger – which became quite Duddy-esque that evening) laughter and joy filled the theatre.

Among the stories, the chatter and banter one important nugget of info : he's signed on for another year in Holby City. Dofty fans, rejoice!

The second half started in the usual way...if I can describe his version of 'Feeling Good' as usual, which it isn't!

'Hushabye Mountain' followed (I know it's a lullaby, but I could listen to Lee sing that any time at all), then on to another Q&A.

I love these. They bring such unexpected questions, including tonight:

Why is Lofty called Piglet? This gave him an opportunity to talk about Wanda Ventham, but I get the impression the script writers hadn't given him that part of his backstory.

Will you be singing on Holby? He explained that he's not allowed to sing on Casualty (not even when playing with an adorable rottweiler puppy), but he will be singing to Dom at his wedding. (Squeal!). He then pointed out this will be Lofty singing, not Lee – so don't expect any 'From Now On' moments.

And some question about who his favourite Joseph? I can't recall exactly. I do remember it led Lee onto a lovely story about how Donny Osmond had been at his opening night, when the revolve failed. He explained about sitting there with a towel over his head, and Donny coming to talk to him and give him encouragement. Awwww!!!

After the Q&A he got on with his set list – 'Paint it Black', 'Everything', 'Why God Why'... and 'Back for Good', which again gave him his O2 moment with the audience waving lights at him. One of my friends told me later that she'd seen John singing along, but I'd missed that. I determined to watch him the next night.

Finally in a little change to the standard running order, 'Blackbird' followed by 'Anthem'.

I suppose he's done this as Tim is new to the band and probably not fully confident with that intricate 'Blackbird' melody. He did make a little slip in Newport.

Whatever the reason I hope they keep this new order. 'Anthem' is a much better song to finish on. That last note pulls the crowd onto their feet – ah the cheering they gave him! So good to hear!

Then of course the real finale – 'Any Dream Will Do' complete with coat and a manly twirl. The proper show ending had the audience jumping to their feet again. That's the way to do it Mr Mead!

One of the great things about this series of concerts is the signings afterwards. No standing at a cold and soggy stage door hoping Lee might appear so we can congratulate him: a nice warm theatre foyer to queue in and the pleasure of chatting to – well whoever happens to be next to us.

On this occasion I had a CD for him to sign. His 10th Anniversary CD is a perfect birthday pressy for several of my friends 😊. This particular queue moved fast! I don't know why. Lee himself showed no sign of rushing. Perhaps the good people of Newport needed to hurry away...or perhaps a significant proportion of the audience had a ferry to catch. Two of our Meady regulars certainly did, and we said our au revours (no need to say goodbye, we know we'll be seeing them tomorrow) as soon as they'd spoken to them.

Lee, charming as ever, signed my CD. We thanked him for another excellent show and after a brief chat about the island withdrew through the park back to the pub, just in time for last orders!

Ooo just dropped my hat on the floor. Really Jane you are such a clutz. Put it away or you're going to lose that, girl.

I think I can call this a good day in the life of this Meady fan.

We're on the Road to Yeovil

Phew! We're in Yeovil at last! It's been a long journey!

Things started well enough this morning. All four of our intrepid travellers were up and ready to leave the hotel by 9.30am.

"Good morning!"

"Good morning!"

Our ferry wasn't until 11am but we'd already discovered that they'll put you on an earlier ferry if you arrive before your time – and if there is room.

As it turned out we arrived at the ferry terminal too early even for the 10 am departure so we went for a little drive to see some of the delights of Ryde.

20 mins later we were feeling rather smug as we sat in the queue of cars being loaded onto the 10am ferry. Hmm. 10am. A good time to give a traveller plenty of time to reach Yeovil – you know, maybe if said traveller just happened to be a musician wanting to reach the town in time for a sound check – just kinda thinking aloud here 😊.

I wonder if the same thoughts hovered in my companion's minds.

Not that it mattered. As it happened the driver in front of us had decided to visit the canteen area. Ooo our frustration as the high vis vest brigade waved all the other traffic on board leaving those of us stuck behind Mr "I Fancy A Pie So I'm Going To Have One" to fume silently.

Now we had an hour to wait. And we'd not had breakfast. Fierro Roche and Pickled Onion Monster Munch it is then. Humph.

Actually the driver in front was so long about whatever he was doing I began to fear he might still be faffing about at 11am. But no. He returned in time and we followed him on board – the first two cars to load.

Right. Now you have to picture the scene and consider our mind set.

Yesterday on the way to the Isle of Wight, we'd been among the last to board. We'd barely pulled up before we were told to leave our car.

So we're sat in the car on the vehicle deck, windows up, and we could hear people shouting. I couldn't hear all of what they said but caught the phrase "Out of your car!" a couple of times

Around us other passengers we already heading for the exits. We gathered up our coats and prepared to move.

Now on this ferry they'd loaded the cars three abreast. They'd staggered the cars in the middle lane so that those in the outside lanes had room to open at least some of their doors. The two on the driver's side could open their doors fully; my friend in the front passenger seat had room to squeeze out; but with a bulwark next to me, I would have to slide over and climb out.

"OK, everyone ready? I'll get you sorted. Don't leave anything you need," said our driver.

Now you have to remember, we've been stuck in the car for over an hour, and we're all...how shall I say this... not really 27 anymore. We emerged with various groans and wobbles, dropping coats, picking them up – sort of like the Keystone Cops. If they were women. And middle aged. But with more scarves.

Giggling like mad, we opened the boot.

"Get back in your car!" A man in a hi vis was going spare, "How many times do I have to tell you!"

Shamefaced I climbed back into the car along with the others.

Eventually we risked leaving the car again...no shouting, phew! Up the stairs we went to find a nice place to sit and watch the world (or at least the small part of it departing Newport) go by.

The world included various members of Lee's band, who waved and said hi.

The crossing lasted just long enough for us to buy and drink tea and coffee. Then back in the car we climbed.

In Portsmouth we had a bit of a change around. I joined the other car so that each one contained a navigator cum texter should we need to communicate.

All went well for a while until the sat nav, attempting to avoid a closure on a motorway, took us on a magical mystery tour via Southampton. Crickey that was a bad call. We were going nowhere. Man, it was frustrating.

But at long last the traffic cleared and we reached Yeovil about half an hour after the others.

The four of us changed and generally tarted ourselves up in the hotel room. Then off we toddled to a near by pub met up with our friends from Cornwall. How lovely to see them both looking so well. Dinner was... OK but the banter around the table great fun.

We couldn't linger though. We had a theatre to get to – and a meet and greet!

The foyer of the Octagon buzzed with excited people. Among them we noticed a girl who became briefly one of the gang. I saw her standing there in the most fabulous purple dress and stopped her to admire it. We discovered the wearer was a really nice lass, and hung around with her until the theatre staff brought us through to the meet and greet room.

We had some lovely places for meet and greets this tour, but the back room they led us to wasn't the nicest. A couple of small round tables, and three or four trestle tables had been set out with the sort of plastic bucket chairs beloved of church halls. Our friend in purple sat at one of the trestle tables at the back of the room. We joined her, as did some other fans. It was very pleasant to have a mixed group to chat to – but I was a wee bit of a disappointed to find that our table hadn't been cleaned. I spent a good deal of my time sat there avoiding putting my elbow in a splodge of marmalade.

Then in came Lee and sticky tables got forgotten – almost. I managed not to mess up my nice new sparkly blue top.

Lee did his rounds of the room, effortlessly charming all he spoke to. Then he came to us. He greeted us with an enormous smile and chatted for a while, relaxed and easy.

To be honest I can't remember the things we said today (Queen songs featured) but he had a little to say to everyone before he posed for pictures.

I'm delighted with the pic of our little gang. Such a nice one of all of us!

So from meet and greet to theatre bar, already busy with diners. Our group still including the lady in purple found some nice comfy chairs, ordered drinks and settled down for a pleasant wait. Others joined us for a while, and we drifted about among a nice big crowd of fans. Lots of Hellos and laughter.

At last it's time to take our seats. I've got a feeling this one will be a doozy!

Half Way through the Tour

Ah tonight's concert was splendid if we thought he was on form at Newport he was even more on the nail tonight.

The Octagonal is a smart modern theatre, it's stage only moderately high so that we happy meet and greeters in the front row didn't have to crane our necks to see the band.

Adam stepped on to the stage and we're away, with Lee in his world of 'Pure Imagination'. The lighting rig enveloped him in a golden glow, so as we gazed up from the front row it seemed as though I was gazing upon an embodiment of a medieval angel. An amber radiance gilded his curls, his eyes both sensitive and compassionate swept the audience.

Ok so tux, microphone kinda inappropriate to that image...but you know where I'm coming from, don't you.

His set list remained the same as the night before but was it me? Were those big notes a shade more powerful? A smidgeon longer? I think so.

Every song imbued with emotion – especially the musical theatre numbers which of course lend themselves to Lee's particular style.

Of all of them, 'From Now On' is still the one I await most eagerly. It sticks in my head if I let it - being such a tremendous song. That night the pair of us sitting together provided some (unheard above the music) "and we will come back homes". How could we help it, with music so engrossing?

Mind you 'Bring It Home' was pretty special that evening too. Being so close, able to see every nuance on that expressive face, well you can imagine how enraptured I was - especially as his eyes, roving all over the stalls, kept making contact with mine. Oh crickey!

And 'Close Every Door'!! Perfect! Those of us on the front row shuffled forward on our seats as his last big note sounded, and as it climaxed we sprang to our feet. I glanced behind me. The whole auditorium was on its feet. Fabulous!

The second half again followed the same pattern as Newport, with a Q and A immediately after 'Hushabye Mountain'.

Even familiar questions can bring a bit of a laugh.

"What role would you most like to play?" Answered initially with "Phantom", but then he started talking about playing Elphaba and being green. Which was an interesting image. Oh please, please Meady – you can't do that! 😊

A shame he was very adamant that he won't be doing Strictly. I can understand his reasons: he doesn't want to go through the public judging him again. But he talked warmly about his friends Chucky (sorry he, corrected himself, Charles) Venn and Dr Ranj, which was sweet.

So many highlights, but I must mention 'Everything'. I really like 'Everything'. It's such a sweet song among all those huge, dramatic numbers...and he sang "every song, I sing along" at ME! ME I TELL YOU!!! OK, OK at my friend. But she was sitting next to me so it counts!

Oh and 'Back for Good'. I mentioned that one of my friends said she saw John singing along in Newport. Well I started watching John while the audience were doing the "we're at the O2" thing. He and Richie had evidently colluded. The two of them leaned into John's mike singing the chorus literally behind Lee's back.

I wasn't the only one to notice, giggles rippled round the auditorium, for no one seemed to miss it. Of course Lee sussed and turned round to look. How he managed to keep singing while practically corpsing I don't know!

From the silliness of 'Back to Good' to the beauty of 'Blackbird', finishing with 'Anthem' – and another standing o!

Finally, he donned his coat for ‘Any Dream Will Do’. And the lighting team – who’d been top notch right through the evening – excelled themselves, cascading multicolour pools all over the stage.

The crowd sang, swayed, and thoroughly enjoyed themselves – and to show Lee how much, the third standing ovation of the night.

Lee took his bow, and rose triumphant in the shining lights. Oh that medieval angel look, right back!

I’d have liked to stay overnight in Yeovil, but the hotel was rather dear. Prudence demanded I save money. Fortunately one of my mates was kind enough to let me come home with her.

We said good night to our friends without staying for the signing.

I managed to not to fall asleep in the car. Just! And crawled straight into bed when we reached home.

The Streets of Winchester

I’ve discovered something: cats are rather less forgiving than teddy bears. My friend’s white cat decided to join me for the night – or rather I joined her as she had possession of the bed when I tumbled into it.

After a good hard stare at me, no doubt wondering why this strange person was in her bed, she settled down next to me. Now I’m a restless sleeper and every time I turned over I disturbed my furry companion. She’d make her feelings known by walking over me and staring right into my face as if to say “are you going to stay still or what!”. She gave up in the end and went off to sleep with her ‘mum’. Sorry kitty!

The next day started bright and sunny.

We set off for Winchester just before midday. This time the roads were kind to us and we arrived a little ahead of schedule.

I’ve often lamented that our Meady tours often take us to interesting places, but we never get chance to see them. On this occasion we were all determined so see something more than the restaurant, the venue and the hotel. My friend agreed to accompany me to Winchester cathedral.

I have been to Winchester before. My husband and I once had a holiday near and came into the city for a day. We saw a military museum and the famous Round Table but didn’t go into the cathedral. Only later did I find out that Jane Austen is buried here.

So my quest was mainly to pay my respects to my favourite author but also to admire the cathedral itself. My friend gamely stayed with me and even found a few things to interest her including a couple of macabre tomb effigies. We both went potty over the medieval floor tiles. I’m still gobsmacked the public can walk on them.

Just as I finished taking photos I got a text: the others were parking up. We headed back to the theatre to meet them.

We ate dinner that evening at Loch Fyne. After two sets of OK but not special pub meals, I think we all very much enjoyed a meal a wee bit more sophisticated.

On to the show...

After two swish, modern theatres I felt the charm of Winchester's little Theatre Royal. In the packed foyer we met up with several regulars, including our Stage Lippy twins. Nice to get a chance to chat with them, though it was little more than hello, goodbye before we headed into the auditorium.

Inside, a quaint, traditional stalls with red plush seats rising in a sensible rake. Those of us in row C had a decent amount of legroom and an excellent view. A circle swept around the back of the theatre. It, like the stalls, was choc-a-bloc full.

A nice buzz as the houselights dimmed. And here we go with 'Pure Imagination'.

I did wonder whether Lee would still be on the same form after a weekend's worth of concerts I should have known better. It seemed that Lee has carefully protected his voice over the weekend. He was certainly sounding as good as he did on the Isle of Wight – and he was looking just as gorgeous too, no hint of tiredness in his face.

In fact if anything this was the most energetic of his shows. More dancing in 'Dancing Thru Life', playing up to the laughter, which grew from giggles to howls. I have seen this routine so many times – wouldn't you think I'd be immune to his cheeky silliness by now?

Absolutely not! I adored it!

Then the smooth, seductive 'All of Me', which, for some reason I found myself imagining two skaters ice dancing to.

The wonderfully powerful 'Without You'...

Each song he delivers with his trademark builds and thoughtful interpretation.

The crowd didn't stand for 'Close Every Door' at the end of the first act, but they cheered and cheered.

As I made my usual interval trip to the ladies I caught snatches of several conversations.

"Of course *I've* loved him since I saw him in Joseph."

"I've seen him twice before in concert."

"I saw him in Joseph *and* Wicked."

I didn't join in this game of Meady oneupmanship. It would have been too close to cheating!

Another stonking performance of 'Feeling Good' opened the second half. If Lee was feeling tired after his weekend of performing he showed no sign of it, soaring to the high notes, holding them with practiced ease....oh that guy is something special. Do you want to know a secret? I used to think no one but Nina Simone could do justice to that song. Wrong Jane!

A Q and A followed. He's getting better and better, more and more comfortable handling the public's questions. Mind you one caught him out.

"When will Lofty and Dom get married?"

"We are married!"

In any case he corrected himself quickly. "I'm sure they'll get married pretty soon."

I'm sure he's right!

Another question this time from our very own: "Do you keep in touch with anyone from Joseph?"

"Yes," he said and he spoke warmly about his friendship with Keith – how remarkable it is for the runner up in a talent show to be so supportive, so generous to the winner. Then he talked about Daniel and the great friendship they enjoyed.

"All of which was lovely," she told me afterwards "But I was talking about the stage show."

Ah well never mind! No reply is ever less than interesting.

Back to the singing. I must mention 'Paint it Black', that perennial favourite for Meady audiences. We've gotten used to his phenomenal ability to change mood, swinging from comic to melancholy; jubilant to tortured, within the space of seconds. And in particular, how he counteracts the dramatic intensity of 'Paint it Black' with his playful Mick Jagger impression immediately after it. Well on this occasion his Mick Jagger was the funniest I'd ever seen.

"He's doing Max Wall now!" My friend said as she applauded. Lee mentioned at one point over the weekend that he's not a comedian. He's so, so wrong.

'Back for Good', 'Everything', 'Why God Why', 'Bring Him Home' from Les Misérables... each number so enjoyable in different ways. All too soon we reached 'Blackbird', still in its new slot.

Finally 'Anthem' fittingly ending the concert. Well except for 'Any Dream Will Do'. As always Lee, resplendent in his Joseph coat, returned to the stage for the song he'll probably be singing for the rest of his life. Come on everyone! All together now! "I closed my eyes..."

After the concert the foyer filled up with audience members eager to see Lee. Notice that I'm not saying signing queue. Initially it was more like a front of Adelphi scrum. Not because the good people of Winchester are pushy or don't know how to stand in line, but just coz the position of the signing desk, shape of the room, and sheer volume of people (some of whom were just trying to leave) made it difficult to know best where to stand.

Eventually we realised a proper queue had formed and joined the end once the foyer had emptied a little. Our little gang joined it and enjoyed a few words with the lovely man we adore so greatly.

So the weekend is over.

But on this occasion, it doesn't feel like an ending. Only a week to go before we come together again for Stephen and Lee in Holborn.

PS. I love you Mr Mead!