

Warwick Retired Staff Association

Recollections of eight years of being the Committee Visits Organiser.

I took over the job from Alan Foster at the AGM in October 2014 having been persuaded that it did not take too much time. Alan offered me advice regarding the choice of coach operator as he had had some poor experience with one in particular. With this in mind, I set off and introduced myself to Shaws Coaches. Yes, they were very willing to help. Joan Cole was Chair at the time and I met up with her for lunch and we discussed various possible trips. I assumed that each trip would need formal committee approval. I learnt that this was not the case and I could choose whatever I thought would appeal to members. That made it a little bit easier.

I selected Bletchley Park for my first foray in May 2015. I did have an ulterior motive. We duly arrived with a pretty full coach and most headed for the café. I learnt that this was generally the form these visits take. The film, The Imitation Game starring Benedict Cumberbatch had been fairly recently filmed partly at Bletchley. Being the story of Alan Turing, in the main house there were various artifacts from the film. However, my interest lay elsewhere. My father's cousin was Gordon Welchman who in many ways was a more significant element of the work at Bletchley than Turing. Gordon was in charge of Hut 6 working on German army and naval messages. Whilst Turing improved the Polish Bombe which was an early computer designed to interpret and break the German Enigma codes, Gordon developed it into a much more powerful instrument by his additional element, known as the Diagonal Board. His contribution was somewhat overlooked by the British authorities and Gordon departed after the war to the US where he took up a post at MIT. At the end of the day when we were boarding the coach, I managed to miss count the number of members and spent several minutes looking for a non-existent missing member !

Trip number two was to Cardiff in November 2015. Memorable for the wrong reasons. Firstly, the M50 was closed so our driver elected to continue down the M5 to the Severn Bridge crossing into Wales. The coaches are equipped with a device which allows them to pay road tolls remotely without stopping. However, on this occasion, the "thing" attached to the windscreen refused to work at the bridge. The driver had no cash, So I ended up passing him a £20 note to enable us to proceed. We duly arrived in Cardiff. The first "named storm" of the winter was due to arrive that day and it duly did. With a few breaks, the wind increased as did the rain and by the time we left, it was pretty awful. However, I think members enjoyed the day and managed to see some of the sights including the Castle, the National Assembly for Wales, the new dock facilities that replaced the coal exporting industry and the National Stadium.

Unless my memory has failed completely, I was unable to organise a trip in the spring of 2016 as I had had a hip replacement in April and I was not yet fully recovered.

In November 2016, we were off to Bath for the Christmas Market. We had a crisp dry day and the various stalls were delightful. They were all in equally sized matching “ sheds “ for want of the better word. Bath was my wife’s local “ place to go “ as a child and teenager, so she was able to reminisce and try to find the places she remembered. Bath offers so much with the Abbey, the architecture and of course the Baths, Pulteney Bridge on the River Avon .I found an enormous “ deck chair “ in one of the squares and had my photo taken which I now seem to have lost. Very convenient. I think the trip was enjoyed by all.

In May 2017, we were off to the Churchill War Rooms off Whitehall in London. We stopped on the M40 for a brief comfort stop on the M40. Then it onward into London. The traffic got worse and worse and the driver tried to find an alternative route but every turn was met with a traffic jam. We got as far as Oxford Street. He managed to cross it, eventually. We twisted and turned, even going through Berkeley Square. I don’t think there were any nightingales singing at the time. We had a timed slot for the venue but were an hour late. I rushed ahead to try to sort out something with the ticket office. Luckily, they managed to find us an alternative slot and we were ushered into a private briefing room. After the briefing we were free to explore the underground facility used by Churchill throughout Second World War. It was a fascinating day. Then it was back out to Whitehall to find the coach. The driver had asked me to call him when we were all assembled but as I tried to call him, there was a Shaws Coach coming around the corner.

The late 2017 trip was to Cambridge. Again, an almost capacity coach set off on a chilly but fine day. Being a collegiate university, students were everywhere all going in different directions from their colleges to lectures etc, or whatever students get up to! The architecture of the colleges is something to behold with King’s College Chapel being the highlight for me. Its history is fascinating and space doesn’t permit me to elaborate here. The Corpus Clock, outside the Taylor Library of Corpus Christi College was amazing and possibly the strangest clock in the world. It was unveiled in 2008 by the late Stephen Hawking. It is only accurate every five minutes. The Fitzwilliam Museum holds the most interesting collection of treasures and part of a day exploring, does not do it justice. It wasn’t an ideal day for punting but there were a few out enjoying the view of the Backs. Our journey home was interesting. As we approached the M11 link onto the A14, the driver noticed that the M11 was at a standstill. So, we returned to Coventry, via Cambourne, St Neots and Bedford, down to the M1. The pretty route, perhaps.

It must be 40 years since I visited Kew Gardens, so I thought it was time to return in May 2018. We had a glorious day with perfect May weather. With so much to see, it was difficult to choose. Would it be Queen Charlotte's House, the Treetop Walk, The Palm or Temperate House, the Pagoda ? .Unfortunately the Treetop Walk was closed which would perhaps have been my first choice. However as a result, the restaurant was the first point of call, instead, once again. I recall on the previous visit many moons ago, I spent a considerable amount of time inspecting all the orchids in one of the houses. I am not sure, now where that was but the Palm House was definitely a highlight of the day. As always with Kew, time ran out and it was time to get back to the coach.

Next came to Supreme Court in London. A different month this time, namely August 2018. I received an invitation to visit the Court so, I thought, why not. The Court is relatively new (2009) and replaces the House of Lords as the final court of appeal in the country. It occupies a building in the south west corner of Parliament Square formerly Middlesex Guildhall opposite Westminster Abbey. We were limited by the number of members who could be taken around the Court at any one time, so I split the party in two groups. Once through security we were met, appropriately, by a Warwick graduate who guided us through the three court rooms and the library, normally not open to the public. The Courts have a different feel from the usual layout, with the judges sitting at the same level as the rest of the court. There is no witness box and the court doesn't try cases. Lawyers present the facts of a particular case of public interest and the court decides on the law. Altogether a fascinating day and I would recommend anyone visiting London to put the Supreme Courts on the bucket list.

A change of direction for the May 2019 trip; off to Tyntesfield a few miles from Nailsea in North Somerset. Tyntesfield is a National Trust property which was owned by the Gibbs family from 1844. Their wealth, originally, came from guano in Peru which was used to fertilise agricultural land and revolutionized Victorian farming. The house was enlarged and " modernised " by three generations of the family but the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the Second World War took its toll on the house and family fortunes and the last Gibb member died rather unexpectedly in 2001. The National Trust launched an appeal and managed to secure it for the nation as one of the most complete Victorian country houses and estate along with a unique collection of family possessions. It was a very interesting day and once again, the weather gods were on our side.

For the Christmas visit in 2019, we headed north to York. Whilst it was a pretty chilly day but nevertheless dry and sunny. The Christmas market was in full swing and there as a great atmosphere. There are many attractions in York, such as the Jorvik Centre, the Shambles, the Cathedral, the National Railway Museum, the Mansion House plus many fine restaurants. The big disappointment was the St John's

University was holding its Degree Congregation in the Cathedral which was closed for the day. I personally wanted to see the Railway Museum again, not having been there since 1982. Whilst Jill and I managed a few minutes there towards the end of the day, the departure time was fast approaching and a hurried walk back across the river was necessary. A worthwhile trip but time will always be against one in York.

The next trip I planned, was to the Ironbridge Gorge Museum in May 2020. As we all know, Covid struck and I had the embarrassing task of ringing the coach operator and museum to cancel.

Once Covid appeared to be releasing us from its grip in May 2023, I hoped that the Brooklands Museum near Weybridge would bring people out of their shells. The committee had noted some unrest amongst members that no trips had been organised. Whether it was Covid or the lack of interest in the venue, we shall never know but with very few members signing up, I had once again to cancel the trip. I am sure members would have enjoyed the venue as there is more there than initially meets the eye.

In August 2023, I began thinking about a winter trip. I had never been to the Black Country Living Museum and I hoped it would appeal. We managed to get around 35 members to sign up. When I rang the museum to confirm numbers etc., they informed me that they did not open on Mondays or Tuesdays in the winter ! Something that they failed to mention when I initially contacted them with possible dates, both of which were a Tuesday in November. After hurried discussions with our secretary and the coach company, we got out a brief e mail very quickly with the alternative date of Thursday 23rd November. Fortunately, only a few members were unable to change their plans so with a modest 30 or so on board the coach, Kay Rainsley very kindly hosted the day as, unfortunately, I was unable to make it this time. I understand that it was an enjoyable trip.