

2024 Annual AWAKE u3a Stately Homes Group Holiday

On Monday 1st July at 8am we boarded the coach at Willerby Square for our annual holiday. Acklam's had provided us with a brand-new Elite coach with 'conference seating' at the rear and Ricky, our ever-cheerful young driver.

Over the Humber Bridge and our first stop was Boughton House near Kettering in Northamptonshire. Built in the 1680s by the 1st Duke of Montagu he was inspired by the Palace of Versailles in the architecture and the garden design. It is now owned by the 9th Duke. The house is set in 11,000 acres and, after lunch, we had a guided tour of the surrounding villages in our coach.

We reached our hotel in the late afternoon. The Southcrest Manor Best Western Hotel near Redditch, south of Birmingham, proved to be perfect for our needs as well as being ideally situated. Evening meals were pre-ordered which led to a few tricky situations, but the hotel staff were very efficient and invariably helpful.

On Tuesday, a short drive took us to the first of the two National Trust properties in Warwickshire we would visit that day. Packwood House is a timber-framed Manor House inherited in 1925 by Graham Baron Ash who spent two decades converting it to a Tudor 16 style. He filled it with numerous precious items bought from auctions as other country houses closed down. Recycling to save history for us to appreciate now.

A very short drive after lunch took us to Baddesley Clinton, a spectacularly moated Manor House dating back to the 13th century in the Forest of Arden. From 1517 to 1940 it was owned by the Ferrers family who remained Roman Catholic after the Reformation. We saw one of several 'priest holes' used to hide people during searches by the authorities.

On Tuesday after dinner, Chris hosted an entertaining general knowledge quiz. Another Warwickshire National Trust property is Hanbury Hall which we visited on Wednesday morning. A 2-storey red-brick building in the Queen Anne style, it was built in the early 18th century on the site of an earlier mansion. Particularly impressive (and of great historical interest) were the wall and ceiling paintings depicting scenes from Greek mythology.

Across the county border, we had several free hours in the afternoon exploring the city of Worcester. Ricky dropped us off opposite the magnificent cathedral, next to the statue of Edward Elgar. As during last year's holiday in Stratford, lunch in Marks and Spencer's Cafe proved popular. A visit to the cathedral was essential. Founded in 680, it was rebuilt from 1084 with the central tower completed in 1374. Guided tours are available.

On Thursday we returned to Willerby via Grimsthorpe Castle near Bourne in Lincolnshire. Built around the original 1140 small castle, it was extended and rebuilt in just eighteen months for a visit from King Henry VIII in 1541 on his way to York. The front was designed by Sir John Vanbrugh in 1715 and the parkland designed by Capability Brown in 1771. A guide gave us a commentary as Ricky drove us around some of the 3,000 acres of rolling pastures, lakes and woodland.

Then back over the bridge to the East Riding. We were very lucky with the weather. The week before was far too hot (!) and the week after the rain poured down. Thanks must go to driver Ricky who always knew exactly where he was going. And, thanks yet again, to Chris Watson for organising an action-packed, fascinating holiday for us all. We can't wait for next year!

David Newman