

AWAKE u3a Stately Homes Holiday 2025

There was a chilly breeze on the morning of Monday 7th July as we boarded our Acklam's luxury coach to take us on our annual Stately Homes Group holiday. Each day the weather was warmer. By Thursday we were in the third heatwave of the summer, desperately seeking shade (and ice cream). Graham, our driver, took us to Nostell Priory, a National Trust property near Wakefield. A Palladian house largely designed by Robert Adam and filled with furniture by Thomas Chippendale, it was full of interesting items, including clocks by John 'Longitude' Harrison.

On to our hotel for the three nights. The Rockingham Forest Hotel near Corby in Northamptonshire was in the process of changing ownership and undergoing radical alterations. We all had freshly redecorated ground-floor rooms, although we had breakfast in a different room each morning. The food and service were excellent as were the enormous beds.

On Tuesday we visited a couple of properties close to the hotel. Deere Park had been in a dreadful state after being used to house soldiers during World War 2, but the sale of an unexpectedly discovered copy of the Magna Carta led to funding for repairs. Overflowing with historical items including paintings, textiles and embroideries, it has been owned by the Brudenell family for 14 generations.

A short drive took us to Rockingham Castle, owned by the Watson family (no relation to Chris, unfortunately!). Started as a motte and bailey castle by William the Conqueror and built on regularly since, it has been visited by 14 different English monarchs. It has stunning views over miles of rolling countryside.

Back at our hotel we had a quiz after dinner. It proved rather tricky for those who don't like anagrams.

Wednesday morning was spent cruising. The Rutland Belle took us on a guided tour around Rutland Water, the largest English reservoir by surface area. A haven for birdwatchers, especially after a successful reintroduction of ospreys.

Nearby Lamport Hall, where we lunched and spent the afternoon, featured a number of large and varied gardens, including a rockery housing what is believed to be the oldest garden gnome in the world. Our evening entertainment was a series of riddles posed by Chris which caused much light-hearted debate.

On Thursday we packed up for home, stopping at Belvoir Castle near Grantham on the way. Named by the French conquerors after its beautiful view (looking towards Lincoln Cathedral), the English locals weren't impressed and took to pronouncing it "beaver". Rebuilt three times on the original footprint, its magnificently sumptuous rooms are filled with artworks by such as Gainsborough, Stubbs, Constable and Hans Holbein. The wonderfully restored ceilings were a delight throughout and I would unreservedly recommend a visit.

Like us, after our four days of exploration, the air conditioning on the coach was struggling in the afternoon heat, but it kept going as did we - keener than ever for next year's adventures. Many thanks to everyone who helped to make this a stunningly successful holiday, especially Chris Watson for her painstaking work in organising it all.

David Newman