

Day Trip to Dartmoor Prison Museum and Princetown



A day trip during the summer break as there was no monthly meeting in August was arranged for members who would still like to do something that day. So on Monday 7th August 24 members went to



Princetown on Dartmoor to visit the prison museum and local church.

This trip was arranged following on from a talk by a local historian, Pip Barker about the 'Borstal Boys of Dartmoor'. This was a little known era which is part of the long history of the prison at Dartmoor. During his talk he told us how the blueprint for the foundation of the Borstal system that used to be in place for young offenders was piloted there. He has also written a book about it. Pip is a retired teacher and head teacher and is now a guide at the museum of Dartmoor in Princetown.

Pip was our guide for the day and we started the tour by walking round the walls of the prison to the war graves. Some 11,000 French and 271 American soldiers died here mainly through disease. There are war memorials for both countries here.

The prison was originally built in 1806 for the French prisoners of war who were being kept on large docked ships called 'hulks' in Plymouth harbour and more space was needed. They were marched the 17 miles to Dartmoor when it was completed. In 1813 American prisoners of war were also brought here to be housed. By early 1816 soldiers were repatriated and the prison closed until 1850 when it reopened to take in criminals. It is still a working prison and is now a category C prison with about 600 inmates today. Over the years the prison has been home to famous criminals and Pip told us about these and also explained the large display of various articles from its past on displays as we went round the museum.

After lunch Pip gave a tour of the local church in Princetown, St Michael and All Angels which is infamous as the only church in England to be built by prisoners. It was built between 1812 to 1815 by the prisoners of Dartmoor. The east window contains stained glass from 1910 in memory of the American prisoners who helped build the church. Flags of both countries are displayed in the church along with the union jack. The church is a grade II listed building no longer a functioning church and is looked after by the Churches Conservation Trust.

The day was a great success and everyone was surprised at the depth of history from local landmarks that many had not visited before.

