

The History & Heritage of Hampshire & the Isle of Wight 3rd-7th September 2023

Personal musings

The coach trip set off on a Sunday so inevitably I never knew what day it was during the holiday. Don't worry as this was a positive outcome. A pause during a busy summer when we could enjoy a few days planned and guided by our skilful leader, Helen Natrass; the Blue Badge Guide, Jackie; and coach driver, Ian whom we have seen before. Time to switch off – we did.

However, we were given the usual light reading on day one – Helen's typed 13 page geological research paper – read the section on fracking which is enlightening. We were fortunate not to be set difficult test questions by Helen in order to earn our ticket home, phew.

The weather was superb all trip – no coats or umbrellas needed this time – hats and sun cream only - how blessed we were.

My offering of sweets was not enthusiastically received on the coach – they were either too hard or they melted in the heat – passengers obviously missed Ursula's normal selection (in-joke for experienced u3a coach travellers).

The loo, coffee & cake stops were always timely and welcome – thank you Helen.

The swimming pool at Norton Park Hotel, where we stayed in Winchester, proved a hit with my wife, Pauline and I, as we took a dip at 6.30am (yes, 6.30am, with the swimming pool showers an added bonus!) before enjoying a hearty breakfast to fuel us for the day's activities. Ever mindful not to be late for Helen's coach start times – we mostly achieved five stars, I think.

We stopped en route at Stonehenge. What a shock. I remember being able to just pull up on the side of the road and walk and touch the Stones without charge (apparently this was possible until 1977). Now it's a 1.3 mile "pilgrimage" each way to walk to the Stones and even then you cannot get right up to the stones but walk around them from afar (some 15 yards away – sorry I'm not a metric man). There are shuttle buses that can take you. Even so, the atmosphere is incredible and thanks to the clear sky we were able to take some magical photos.

Being in the heart of the Hampshire countryside we started day two with a song "Winchester Cathedral". Most of us could not remember who the band was. Well, it was by The New Vaudeville Band, released in late 1966! A traffic jam caused a quick change in the sequence of visits and prevented the planned guided tour of Winchester. However we managed to visit The Hospital of St Cross and Almshouse of Noble Poverty in Winchester, described as "England's oldest and most perfect almshouse" – here we were treated to an organ recital by Helen! We then nipped across to Chichester for an amazing visit to

Fishbourne Roman Palace, apparently the site of the largest Roman home found in Britain. We were able to walk around a vast, excavated villa with floor mosaics all under cover thanks to easy to navigate walkways. This is definitely worth a visit. The site was accidentally discovered in 1960, when an engineer working for the Portsmouth Water Company, Aubrey Barratt, was digging a trench for a new water main! The day did actually finish at Winchester Cathedral; apparently the longest cathedral in the World at 526 feet and truly impressive.

During the middle of the trip we saw a lot of Portsmouth. I like the fact that Charles Dickens (I'm a member of the u3a reading group) was born in Portsmouth. Did you know that Portsmouth is the only island city in the UK thanks to the narrow Portsea Creek separating it from the mainland? We took a ferry on day three to the Isle of Wight and were treated to a wonderful tour along the "Military Road" where we stopped at Pearl Café and enjoyed amazing views across the English Channel. I was particularly taken with the Palmerston Follies which are Victorian forts on the crest of Portsdown Hill overlooking Portsmouth and its harbour; but face inland, which to some people looks the wrong way. They were criticized because at the time of their completion, the threat from the French navy had passed. We finished our day on the Isle of Wight with a visit to Osborne House. I have been before but am always struck at the way this shrine to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert's retreat has been preserved in time; very moving.

Our second day in Portsmouth began with a boat tour around the dockyard viewing both Royal Naval ships as well as further historical sights. However the real highlight is the Mary Rose Museum. This is one of the best museums I have ever been to. Have a look at the website and book a trip to visit if you haven't been there as I could write pages on this.

The final leg of our five day trip took in Wisley Gardens en route. Home to some of the largest plant collections anywhere in the world; there were some truly impressive displays. It was a very hot day (remember those) and after a few hours we were glad to get back on the coach and return early to Canterbury at 4.00pm.

In summary; this trip had a very nice feel about it – obviously we are friendly people in u3a. There were no flat spots in the programme such as a steam train that didn't run (another in-joke from previous trips). All credit to Helen for masterminding the trip and, if truth be known, Helen probably needed a holiday to recover from managing us all. We look forward to the next trip which is to South Yorkshire on 26 April 2024 and booking up fast which means we are likely to have a bigger group to look after. Can you help? Please let Helen or I know if we can call on your services.

Robin Terry, Chair

20.09.23