

Reflections on Stour Valley U3A Gardens Holiday 2017

Thirty of us set off bright and early on a promising Sunday morning in late May with the aim of visiting some of the gardens, houses and historic buildings in Shropshire and Staffordshire over the next six days. We were based in Whitehouse Hotel, unusual in that it was built beside the local football stadium and both were originally part of the same concern. The hotel is on the outskirts of Telford, conveniently situated for touring and within a short drive of Shrewsbury and the World Heritage Site of Ironbridge Gorge. In anticipation of delights to come we stopped for lunch en route at Dobbie's Garden Centre in Atherstone. One of the largest in the UK, it has a vast range of items for the home and garden that a few people found impossible, even at this early stage of the holiday, to resist. (You know who you are!)



House and main entrance

too, are marked by neo-classical motifs, not to mention the six huge paintings of classical ruins lending a sombre air to the dining room. A very different note is struck in the family apartments, gradually being opened to the public following the death of the 5th Earl; Better known as society photographer, Patrick Lichfield, he immortalised iconic figures of the '60s and took memorable images of his royal relatives. For myself, I prefer Park Farm and Mill, created at the cutting edge of agricultural reforms and still raising rare breeds: Longhorn cattle, Tamworth pigs and Silkie chickens. The laundry, ironing room, brew-house and kitchens are features that were on view well before Audley End opened similar areas to the public.



Knitted Knight effigy!

walls, designed by Edward Pugin, following the death of his father Augustus Pugin; Shrewsbury Castle and Shrewsbury School. Impossible to see everything as you explore the narrow cobbled streets and 'shuts', blessed with intriguing names such as Gullet Passage and Grope Lane (no prizes for guessing why!) Some places are better viewed from the deck of pleasure boat, Sabrina (an alternative name for Severn), as many of us did. A final joy was to wander round the Dingle, the lovely little sunken garden set within Quarry Park that Percy Thrower created. Lucky ones amongst us saw a black-crowned night heron there, surprisingly happy to pose for photographs!

Our first visit was to the Shugborough Estate, which I last visited in 1980, when it was owned by the National Trust, but administered and maintained by Staffordshire County Council; so early memories of it were a little hazy! Last year the property reverted solely to the care of the National Trust. Driving through the sweeping parkland you can't help but notice several striking monuments punctuating the landscape, inspired by the art of classical antiquity. We found other picturesque ruins and memorials by strolling along the banks of the River Sow and through the gardens. The interiors of the Georgian mansion,



'Tower' ironing stove

The following day was spent in Shrewsbury, set in a loop of the River Severn and blessed with famous sons that include Wilfred Owen and Charles Darwin. A E Housman's 'steeped crest' forms the town skyline, belonging to the churches of St Mary's, St Alkmunds's and St Chad's, each with its own peculiar treasures, not least a 'knitted knight' and Scrooge's fictional tombstone, left after a filming of *A Christmas Carol*. Among over six hundred and sixty historic buildings dating back to medieval and Tudor times are Shrewsbury Abbey, built after the Norman Conquest and the setting for Brother Cadfael, the eponymous detective portrayed on TV by Derek Jacobi; the Catholic cathedral close to the town



Shrewsbury Castle



Laburnum Arch

Wednesday was dedicated to two gardens, the first being the Dorothy Clive Garden. Set on a hillside where the borders of Staffordshire, Cheshire & Shropshire intersect, with a Belvedere offering rewarding views over the surrounding countryside for those who persevere in the climb, you can stroll downhill again afterwards and earn a second reward in the quintessentially English tea garden. A network of paths meanders through the Edible Garden (nice thought!) the Azalea Walk and a Laburnum Tunnel rivalling the one at Bodnant Gardens in North Wales. Wildlife is actively encouraged; everywhere you hear birdsong and baby woodpeckers' heads pop out from holes in an old tree, for all the world like a Disney cartoon, or cuckoos in cuckoo clocks.

The afternoon was devoted to Dudmaston, our second National Trust visit of the week. The estate has remained in the possession of the same family via marriage and inheritance, since the 12th century and the house is still occupied by relatives, which is why you are politely requested not to take photographs and why, as you walk from room to room, you notice family photo albums and the odd pair of shoes or slipper artfully tucked under pieces of furniture. Upstairs galleries designed by Lady Labouchere display her and her husband's art collections: hers chiefly of botanical art and topographical watercolours; his modern works feature abstracts by Ben Nicolson and sculptures by Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth. More sculptures by a local artist spill out into gardens entered through the graceful Eternity Gates, where great oaks and cedars on the terraced lawns stretch down to the Big Pool, a lake bordered by a bog garden. Set further back, is an impressive rockery garden. On the other side of the house we took tea beside the orchard and newly established kitchen garden.



House and Rockery

Nothing quite prepares you for the National Memorial Arboretum. Opened in 2001, the site covers 150 acres and is expected to double in size within a decade. It already contains over four hundred and forty memorials set in a landscape of more than forty thousand trees and bordered on one side by the River Tame. So it made sense to travel round on the land-train with a pre-recorded commentary as the train chugged along, allowing time to take photographs of some of the moving and unusual memorials we passed. These fell into several categories, in different colour-coded zones: Military, Police, Fire & Ambulance Services, Charities and Local or Overseas Organisations. It's impossible to list even a fraction of the memorials and every visitor will have his/her own preferences, memories and reasons. But undoubtedly the most impressive one, to the Armed Forces, is set on a mound, grassy and tree-planted, where two curved and two straight walls enclose large bronze groups within



Armed Forces Memorial

the central space, bearing silent witness to the cost of armed conflict. The bronzes were created by the sculptor responsible for the image of the Queen that appears on UK coinage. Part of the monument's importance lies in the fact that it is the only one in the country to record over sixteen thousand names of those killed on duty across the world since the end of WWII. A flight of steps and a spiral walk-way lead up inside and the gap between the walls allows a shaft of light to penetrate to the heart on the symbolic 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of the year. The Act of Remembrance is observed in the Chapel here daily at 11.00 am and relayed by public address system. This was an experience unlikely to be matched or forgotten quickly.

From the Arboretum it's only a short drive to Lichfield Cathedral, which suffered enormous damage during Civil War sieges. As witnessed by an aisle window, the building was restored in the 1660s by Charles II and after internal remodelling in the 18th century, was completely restored to its medieval splendour by George Gilbert Scott, one hundred years later. Uniquely crowned with three spires, known locally as the 'Three Ladies of the Vale', the Cathedral possesses Flemish stained glass from Herkenrode Abbey, replacing original glass that had been lost. Of an even earlier date is the so-called Lichfield Angel of Anglo-Saxon origin, revealed during excavations and reposing in the Chapter House. One of the Cathedral's patron saints is St Chad, whose Gospels are the other Anglo-Saxon treasure here. Scenes from his life are depicted in the Chapter House windows. Musical angels play and sing throughout the Cathedral, some distinguished by peacock feathers in their wings; they recall the story of angels visiting the saint to foretell his death. Green Men also proliferate and an extraordinary number of tomb effigies, though I was more intrigued by a shepherd sporting a Tyrolean hat, among the carved figures in the Lady Chapel reredos.



Gilded boss outside the Lady Chapel



King Richard the Third's Tomb

On our final day we stopped off in Leicester, expressly to visit the tomb of Richard III in the Cathedral. Some of us visited the nearby Guildhall, one of the best preserved in England, whilst waiting for our guided tour. Even before Richard's reinterment turned the Cathedral into a prominent visitor attraction, Leicester was a centre for pilgrimage and St Martin's, dedicated to the converted Roman soldier who shared his cloak with a beggar, was a key place to visit. Richard's dignified, simple tomb is decorated with a deep cut in the shape of a cross for light to flood through, symbolising the light entering Christ's tomb on Easter morning. The neighbouring chapel contains two magnificent Redemption windows by Thomas Denny, using the king's story to

reflect on the human experience. As you enter the Cathedral you're greeted by evocative words from the Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy commissioned for the Reinterment Service. Outside in the Cathedral garden, an artwork entitled *Towards Stillness* consists of parallel metal panels pierced by a series of life-size silhouettes of King Richard on horseback, representing the stages of his journey from the battlefield at Bosworth to his final resting place within the Cathedral; one last memorable image with which to end the holiday.

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