

SOCIETY OUTINGS 2012

Organised and Reported by Sue Holt *et alii*

Spitalfields – April 19

It was a wet and windy day in the City. Our guide, Charlie de Wet, joined us at St Paul's station. She told us that St Paul's was the only church that Sir Christopher Wren managed to finish building in his lifetime; he is buried in the Crypt. Passing through Paternoster Square, we saw the monument to millions of books destroyed by the Great Fire of London in 1666.

We then made our way up King Edward's Street to Postman's Park where on a wall is a series of plaques dedicated to the unsung heroes of London. These identified men, women and children who gave their lives in rescuing siblings and strangers from fire and flood.

Leaving the Park as the rain was getting heavier we walked briskly to St Bartholomew the Less. This church has been used as a hospital chapel since 1184. The square tower and west wall are 15th century; the remainder was rebuilt in 1789 by George Dance the Younger. His rectangular structure with an octagonal interior was again rebuilt by Phillip Hardwick in 1825. There are many memorials to doctors and nurses but, notable was one to the wife of Sir Thomas Bodley, the founder of the Bodleian Library in Oxford. The stained glass windows were destroyed in the Blitz and replaced by windows designed by Hugh Easton. In the hospital museum next door were displayed many of the surgical instruments and medical equipment used in the hospital over the years. There were also some beautiful Hogarth paintings. The rain was still falling, so we hurried down to St Bartholomew the Great for lunch.

The church must have been a spectacular sight, situated as it was originally in a field outside the walls of London. Even today, what is left is magnificent, surrounded by a 21st century city. It was founded in 1123 by a monk called Rahere who, having visited Rome, contracted malaria.

On his way home to England, he dreamt that St Bartholomew asked him to build a church at Smedfield (Smithfield). A royal charter was drawn up to found a priory and hospital. Rahere died in 1145, but the building of the great priory church was continued by the succeeding Priors. It was completed in the mid 13th century, but later Priors altered and extended the building. Architectural fashions change over the centuries, and several examples can be seen in the walls and pillars. The church had a central tower, but this had to be demolished after it was struck by lightning.

The dissolution of the Monasteries had a huge effect on the church. The plate, vestments, jewels and money went to Henry VIII. The six bells were sold and the lead was stripped off the south transept. The north transept, the Nave, and the West Front were demolished. A half-timbered house was built over the south-west doorway. The Nave which was turned into a burial ground is now a garden. The church survived the fire of 1666 and is now the oldest parish church in the City of London.

In the Cloister Café is a hatch in the floor. Underneath is an empty stone coffin. The guide said it was a practise of medieval Priors to have a coffin made in readiness for their future demise. Happily for us, this one was never used and has been left in place by the builders.

Sue Holt

Romney Marsh Churches - May 10

Our visit was arranged with the Romney Marsh Historic Churches Trust, formed in 1982 by local people keen to preserve these interesting churches for posterity. Our guide, John Hendy, joined us at The Royal Oak, Brookland where we stopped for our morning refreshments. As we set off to visit our first church, John told us a little of the history of this very unique area which covers about 100 square miles and contains the only

part of Britain that is officially designated as 'desert'. Romney Marsh incorporates several marshes drained at different times resulting in steps in the land levels. John's deep knowledge and love of the area quickly became apparent to us and made him an excellent guide.

The first church visited was St Clement at Old Romney, once a busy port, but now is three miles inland. Among the many interesting features of this church were a complete set of post reformation fittings, a minstrels gallery, and one of the few surviving pre-reformation stone altars, discovered during restoration work in 1929.

Our next visit was to St George Ivychurch, 'Cathedral of Romney Marsh', once sited in a manor owned by the archbishops of Canterbury, suitably large to reflect their importance but totally inappropriate for the sparse population. Many Rectors there lived away and rarely visited the church. One who held the living for 57 years only visited his church once! One disincentive to living there was the prevalence then of 'marsh ague' (a form of malaria) which resulted in high mortality rates. After exploring the church, including the locally carved 15th century choir stalls and a 15th century ragstone font, we returned to Brookland where the Royal Oak had laid out a buffet lunch for us.

Suitably refreshed, we recommenced our tour by visiting the church of St Augustine which conveniently was next door to the Royal Oak. After telling us a little of the history of the church and pointing out items of specific interest, John took us outside and opened up the door to the separate wooden bell tower that stands in front of the church. All 50 of us fitted comfortably inside the huge tower which John explained was unique in Britain for its size. Following the storm of 1987, the outside has been reshingled but much of the timberwork is original and dates from the 13th century.

The last church we saw was the remote church of St Thomas Becket at Fairfield. In earlier times, often in winter, the church became completely surrounded by water and could only be reached by boat. In 1912 a

causeway was constructed but this could be very muddy and slippery when it rained. Although the spring had been abnormally wet, our visit was on one of the few reasonably dry days, so a long line of us trooped across the causeway, taking care to avoid the many sheep droppings, and crowded into this tiny church. Inside was an exceptionally complete set of 18th century furnishings including a triple decker pulpit and box pews. Lighting is by oil lamps, as there is no electricity. Originally a wooden structure, the walls were replaced with bricks but the church retains most of the original 15th century timbers.

To round off the trip, we stopped at Brenzett village hall where the local WI had prepared for us an excellent afternoon tea with many varieties of home made cakes. Suitably replete, we then embarked on the long journey home. Members who had done a similar visit before remarked that they enjoyed this second visit just as much as the first and even said they would come again, which seems praise indeed.

Bob Trease

Greenwich – June 9

After meeting at Embankment station, we bought our tickets for the river bus to Greenwich. The restored Cutty Sark can be seen in all its glory from the river now it is perched on top of a Visitor Centre, and our guide Margaret outlined how Prince Phillip had been instrumental in rescuing the ship for the nation. She told us all about the refurbishments which have taken place over the past fifty years.

A walk along the river front took us to the Old Royal Naval College which was laid out by Sir Christopher Wren on the site of Greenwich Palace, where Henry VIII and Elizabeth I were born. It was built to be a home for wounded and retired sailors. Between 1873 and 1998 the College trained over 27,000 naval officers but now it is the home of the University of Greenwich and Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance.

The statue of George II in the middle of Grand Square was sculpted by Michael Rysbrack in 1735, and is made of a single piece of marble weighing eleven tons. The King wears the military clothes of a Roman emperor, and holds a sceptre and orb.

The Painted Hall sits within the King William Court. Wren submitted designs for the Hall in 1698, and the roof and dome were in place five years later. In 1708 James Thornhill commenced decorating the interior which he finally completed it 19 years later, but it was felt that the Hall was far too grand for a seamen's hostel. Visitors were allowed admittance for a small fee to view the interior and the residents. In 1806, the body of Horatio Nelson was laid in state in the Hall on its way to burial in St Paul's Cathedral crypt. Between 1824 and 1936, the Painted Hall was known as the National Gallery of Naval Art; with over 300 paintings on display and in 1939, following extensive restoration, the Hall was used as a dining hall for naval officers.

The Chapel was the last part of the Seamen's Hospital to be built and following a fire in 1779, it was redecorated by James 'Athenian' Stuart, the Surveyor to the Royal Hospital, in a Greek revival style. The Chapel, dedicated to St Peter and St Paul, was intended to remind the residents of their former lives.

After marvelling at all the beautiful paintings, we wandered outside to be met by builders and scaffolding preparing the grounds for the Olympic Equestrian events. After thanking our guide, Margaret, we dispersed for lunch.

Sue Holt

1 September - Lewes and Bateman's (NT)

This was our final outing for the year. We left Ruislip by coach at 8am to drive down to Lewes, the county town of East Sussex. The traffic was very light and we arrived in good time at the historic White Hart hotel (a former Georgian coaching inn). Here we met our three town guides for a 90 minute walking tour of Lewes.

Our guides were very knowledgeable and gave us a good insight into the history of

Lewes, which has been an important centre since Saxon times. The name comes from a Saxon word meaning 'hill' and Lewes is still a town of many hills. There are a number of parallel alleys, known locally as twittens, which descend from the centre of the town to the valley of the river Ouse. We walked (rather gingerly) down steeply sloping and cobbled Keere Street, one of the prettiest twittens. We were told of the popular legend that the Prince Regent (later King George IV) once drove a coach and four down it, at top speed, for a wager!

During our guided walks, we visited the remains of Lewes Castle, which was built by William de Warenne, a friend of William the Conqueror. He also founded the Cluniac Priory of St Pancras in 1077; only a few ruins remain, following the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII.

The castle is unusual in having two artificial mounds, on one of which are the ruins of a circular keep; in the 18th century the keep became the summerhouse of a wealthy Lewes wool merchant. There is also a former tilting yard to be seen; it is now an exclusive bowling green, reserved for men only. Ladies are admitted on very rare occasions, but they have to make the tea! Membership is allocated only on the death of a current member, and the fortunate successor takes possession of his woods!

In the castle precinct there is a viewing platform and information board, looking north-west towards Offham Hill, where the Battle of Lewes took place in 1264, between King Henry III and mutinous barons, led by Simon de Montfort. The king was defeated and the power of the monarchy curbed as a result.

Another interesting stop on our walk was the magnificent Elizabethan manor house of Southover Grange; the 17th century diarist, John Evelyn, lived here for several years as a boy. The house is not open to the public, but the beautiful gardens are, and are regarded as one of the town's finest open spaces. Another famous son of Lewes is the radical author and pamphleteer, Thomas Paine, whose *Common Sense* tract rallied the American colonies to the idea of

independence, and *The Rights of Man* was written in support of the French Revolution. He lived in a gabled medieval house (now a restaurant) called Bull House, between 1768 and 1774, and worked as an excise man and tobacconist; he spent his evenings debating politics at the White Hart Inn.

Our guided walk concluded near the colourful Farmers' Market held (fortunately for us) on the first Saturday in the month. We all agreed that we had learned a great deal about the historic town of Lewes and its interesting inhabitants. There was still much to be seen, such as Anne of Cleves House (given to her in consolation by Henry VIII after he divorced her) and we should not forget the Bonfire Night celebrations, among the most spectacular in the country.

We left Lewes after lunch, for a 45 minute drive to Bateman's, near Burwash, the family home of Rudyard Kipling from 1902 to 1936 (and now in the care of the National Trust). The house was built in 1634 of local sandstone and is surrounded by gardens, farmland and trees. At the bottom of the 'Wild Garden' there is a working mill, used in Kipling's time to generate electricity. It was restored in 1975 after years of neglect, and grinds corn on most Wednesday and Saturday afternoons, producing wholemeal flour, which is for sale in the mill shop. The house itself is shown much as it was in Kipling's time and was described by him as 'a real house in which to settle down for keeps'.

The room stewards were very friendly and keen to point out items of interest. This was particularly evident in the upstairs study, which was Kipling's work room and remains almost exactly as he left it. His work table was 10 feet long and very congested with all manner of articles and paraphernalia, such as onyx ashtrays, a tin of cigarettes, brushes, screwdrivers, and a large waste paper basket, filled to overflowing with discarded screwed-up paper! Two walls are lined with books and there were interesting paintings and family photographs on the walls. The large room next to Kipling's study was once a bedroom, but is now used to house a fascinating exhibition of documents, photos, books, family photographs and interesting memorabilia of Kipling's life and work (you could spend a lot of time there). Other rooms to be seen were the Kipling's bedroom, the spare room and another small room, once used as a Powder Closet in the 1660s. Downstairs again to view the final room - the dining room - with its striking 18th century English 'Cordoba' leather wall hangings. Once outside, there was one more item of interest to see, namely Kipling's Rolls Royce, housed in a nearby garage. Then it was off to the National Trust shop and tea room, before our 5 o'clock departure. We had a good journey back, arriving at 7pm after a most enjoyable day out.

Anne Lamb