

SOCIETY OUTINGS 2013

Organised and Reported by Sue Holt *et alii*

The Huguenots of Spitalfields - 4 April

Despite the weather and transport disruptions twenty one people made it to Liverpool Street Station for our walk and talk with Charlie De Wet. In 1598 The Edict of Nantes, granted by Henry VI, gave civil and religious liberties to the Huguenots (French Protestants). They had political rights equal to the Catholics, but Cardinal Richelieu stripped them of their rights, and in 1627 besieged their stronghold of La Rochelle. After a 14 month siege La Rochelle surrendered and the Huguenots were denied their right of assembly, but they were allowed freedom of worship.

In 1685 The Edict of Nantes was revoked, meaning that the practice of any religion except Catholicism was banned. 50,000 Huguenots were forced to flee, some going to America, South Africa and England. About 20,000 came across the Channel with just their knowledge of weaving and whatever they could carry.

Why Spitalfields? There were potential customers in the City and land in Spitalfields to settle. The late 17th and 18th centuries saw an estate of well appointed terraced houses, built to accommodate the master weavers, and grand urban mansions were built around the newly created Spital Square. Christ Church Spitalfields on Fournier Street, designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor was built during the reign of Queen Anne. More humble weavers dwellings were built around the church.

Charlie took us into the back streets to show us her house in Fournier Street, and the house of Anne Maria Garthwaite (Princelet Street), the celebrated 18th century textile designer. She produced over 1000 patterns for damask and brocades. The clothes were assembled by the weavers in the attic rooms where the light was better. Dennis Seavers' House in Folgate Street is a 'still life drama' created to represent what life was like for a family of Huguenot silk weavers. It can be visited by appointment.

I learnt a lot, not having much previous knowledge of the Huguenots.

Sue Holt

Bletchley Park - 18 May

Our guide gave us an illustrated introductory talk and then took us around the site. Bletchley Park was ideal for decryption being away from London and, at the time, on a railway line linking Oxford and Cambridge, both suitable recruiting grounds for key personnel. The estate had been formerly owned by Sir Herbert Leon, a financier; the main house having an unusual blend of different architectural styles.

Bletchley eventually employed around 9,000 people, mainly women, operating around the clock on three eight-hour shifts. Secrecy was paramount, so workers were split into separate groups each being employed on a discrete activity in their own area, only knowing their part of the operation, and sworn to never talk about their work. Some key workers were eccentric. Alan Turing, the mathematician, would cycle to work in summer wearing a gas mask to protect against hay-fever and padlocked his mug to a radiator to prevent others borrowing it.

In the afternoon, another guide demonstrated the electronic machines used to decrypt German High Command messages. In an amazing intellectual feat, Bill Tutte had accurately deduced the design of the complex encryption machine used but manual decipherment took too long. In 1944, Tommy Flowers, a telephone engineer, built Colossus a fast electronic calculator. This used valves and was the forerunner of today's electronic computers. The significance of these men's achievements has largely gone unrecognised until now because of the need for secrecy at the time.

The remainder of the day was spent exploring the site. One fascinating exhibit was a tribute to the pigeons used to send messages. The enemy released birds of prey to attack them. Pigeons to be returned were dropped by pigeon parachute - a small enclosed basket attached to a small parachute. A pigeon roll of honour celebrated high achieving pigeons.

Bletchley Park is extensive so no one managed to examine all the many exhibits but we all were able to learn more about a highly interesting part of the history of the Second World War.

Robert Trease

City Gardens - 19 June

Inside the square mile of the City there are 11,000 acres of green spaces, with 2,000 trees. These amazing figures were given to us as an introduction by Charlie de Wet our City of London Guide. There are numerous small gardens, many as the result of bomb damage in WWII, and others established by builders of the large office buildings.

Our first garden, opposite St Paul's Information Centre was the Cleary Garden, named after Fred Cleary, who in the 1970s was instrumental in planting trees and the creation of gardens in the City. The house here was bombed, and the shoemaker Joe Brandis decided to make a garden from the rubble. He collected mud from the Thames and plants from his home in Walthamstow. Thus a new garden was created and in July 1949 it was visited by the Queen Mother. The peonies here were a gift from Japan.

We wandered down Huggin Hill, where pigs were kept in the Middle Ages, to Lower Thames Street. This was the original bank of the Thames before the embankment was built. Here ships used to unload supplies of garlic and sugar. The nearby church of St James Garlickhythe was founded in the 12th century, rebuilt in 1326, and rebuilt again by Wren 1676-83. Badly damaged in WWII it was restored 1954-62. Inside was a sword rest, a pulpit with a wig stand and fine recent stained glass windows. Our guide said it was the lightest church in the City.

We soon came to St Michaels Paternoster Royal - the Seafarer's church. This church is first mentioned in 1219. Royal is a corruption of Reole, a nearby street inhabited in the past by the merchants who imported their wine from La Reole near Bordeaux. In 1409 the church was rebuilt by Richard Whittington who lived nearby and was buried here. Like many neighbouring buildings it was bombed in 1944 and rebuilt after the war.

Passing Salters Hall, rebuilt in 1976 and designed by Sir Basil Spence, we trod on the oldest steps in London. They are constructed of Yorkshire stone and dated AD 43. There were several Halls of City Livery Companies (Tallow Chandlers, Innholders and Skinners) but unfortunately we were unable to see the interiors.

Further on we passed the best preserved Merchants' House in the City, 1&2 Pountney Hill, built in 1703. Laurence Pountney Hill and the nearby church of St Laurence Pountney are

named after Sir John Pountney who became Lord Mayor four times. William Harvey, discoverer of the circulation of the blood lived near here with his brother, who was a rich merchant. Here too is the only private garden in the City.

Walking along Fishmongers Wharf we had a glimpse of the pavement to the old London Bridge and the Church of St Magnus the Martyr at the entry of the former bridge. Soon we arrived at the Tower of St Dunstan in the East which was destroyed in WWII. It was dedicated to a Saxon Archbishop of Canterbury. In 1971 the tower and nave walls were restored using money from vehicle fines, which also provided lead planters at £6,000 each! The lovely gardens are cared for by 36 gardeners who cultivate 250,000 plants in their nursery. Since the climate in the City is 2°C warmer than Paris, Mediterranean plants can be grown. I noticed several Redwood, Ginkgo, Magnolia, mulberry trees, Hellebores, Clematis and strawberry trees as we wandered around. Here and there were nest boxes for birds and not surprisingly we saw flocks of pigeons surrounding office workers eating their lunch.

At the end of an interesting walk we made our way to the crypt of St Paul's for rest and refreshment.

Sylvia Ladyman

Bedford & Elstow - 16th July

Our day commenced in Elstow, a quiet picturesque village with many timber framed buildings on the outskirts of Bedford. Here we could have morning coffee in a lovely garden against the backdrop of the Abbey Church. We learnt that the Abbey Church had been a massive building dating from the 11th century but was much reduced during the Dissolution of the monasteries. It included the font used for John Bunyan's baptism in 1628.

We were shown around the Moot Hall, a 14th century timber framed building on the village green, which contained many Bunyan mementos and an interesting collection of old furniture. It had been well restored for the millennium. Regrettably the cottage where, reputedly, Bunyan had begun married life was demolished by the local council in 1969 so we contented ourselves with photographs and a plaque commemorating the site.

We then continued to Bedford where town guides gave us introductory tours. It was market day so the town was bustling with activity.

A delightful feature was the River Great Ouse. In Victorian times, town planners decided to create large parklands on both sides of the river, so unlike most towns there are lovely river walks.

We visited the Bunyan Meeting House, opened in 1850 on the site of the original meeting house. There we admired the great bronze entrance doors depicting ten scenes from *The Pilgrim's Progress* and inside saw the impressive stained glass windows. A postcard of one window was the only mail to reach Terry Waite when a hostage in Lebanon.

Our next stop was the nearby Bunyan museum and the newly opened Higgins Art Gallery and Museum. We also saw the restored mound of the old castle destroyed in 1224, and part of the foundations of the Great Meeting Hall.

We were shown the property of the Panacea Society. This Society had been founded in 1919 and kept a house ready in Bedford for the second coming of the Messiah. It had eventually become very wealthy owning several properties. When the last member died in 2012, the Society became The Panacea Charitable Trust established to help local groups concerned with poverty and health and which intends to open a museum about the original society.

Above the Corn Exchange was a monument to Glen Miller. During the Second World War, around 8,000 BBC broadcasts from 'somewhere in England' actually came from Bedford, where buildings such as the Corn Exchange were used as studios. Glen Miller had made broadcasts from July to December 1944.

Our members spent the rest of the warm afternoon exploring the town further. Many spent time in the extensive new Museum. Some lunched in local establishments, many owned by people of Italian descent. Many Italian immigrants had been recruited for the local brickmaking industry and about a third of the population of Bedford claim Italian descent.

Some members who had never visited Bedford nor knew of Elstow said how much they enjoyed, and were agreeably surprised, by the visit.

Robert Trease

St Albans and Verulamium - August 10

The colourful Saturday market in St Albans was already busy when we arrived, from where we made our way down to the Cathedral for guided tours at 11.15. Our two guides proved to be very knowledgeable and entertaining. The first

things we learned were that the Cathedral has one of the longest naves in the country, second only to Winchester and that it displays an interesting mix of architectural styles, ranging from 11th century Norman to Early English (or Gothic). There are a number of medieval wall paintings on some of the columns.

Above the immense painted arches of the Norman Crossing we were impressed by the wonderful ceilings. The Tower ceiling depicts the red and white roses and heraldic devices of the Houses of Lancaster and York, and may commemorate the first and second battles of the Wars of the Roses, fought in 1455 and 1461 (won by the Yorkists and Lancastrians respectively).

The panels were refurbished in 1951-52 and are a copy of the 15th century originals, which are still hidden above them. The Quire ceiling dates back to the 14th century and the reign of Edward III and was discovered during a Victorian restoration. The painted shields on the Tower walls commemorate the lying-in-state of Edward I's wife Queen Eleanor, whose body rested there on its journey to London.

We then moved on to the impressive High Alter screen, built in 1484, destroyed after the Dissolution and replaced in the late Victorian era. The guide indicated to us the statue of Nicholas Breakspeare, the only Englishman to become Pope, with the Papal title of Adrian IV, and he was interested in the Ruislip connection when we told him of it. We were then shown the modern slate memorial in front of the Screen, where Nicholas' father, Robert of the Chamber (a tenant of the Abbey) was buried among other clergy and priests. The beautiful modern rose window in the north transept was unveiled by the late Diana, Princess of Wales.

On the eastern side of the Abbey Church we stopped at the Lady Chapel (once walled off from the rest of the church in the 16th century and used as a Grammar School for 300 years). Here was the candle-lit shrine of St Alban, Britain's first martyr. It dates from the 14th century and was constructed from Purbeck marble. The shrine was demolished after the Dissolution and only reconstructed in 1872 from over 2000 small pieces, then further restored in the 1990s. A unique feature of St Alban's chapel is the wooden watching loft, used for easy surveillance of pilgrims visiting the shrine. It is thought to be the only surviving loft of its kind in the UK.

Our final stop was at the chantry chapel of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, brother to King

Henry V, and who fought at Agincourt in 1415. He later became Protector of England for the baby Henry VI. This is the only royal tomb in the Cathedral.

For lunch some of us patronised the excellent 'Abbot's Kitchen' situated in the Chapter House after which we boarded the coach for the short drive to Verulamium Park. This was of course the original Roman settlement of Verulamium where the City walls, the outline of the main London Gate and also the Hypocaust can be seen. In the award winning Verulamium museum there was an interesting video of the history of the Verulamium site and many beautiful objects from the Roman city. There were also superb mosaics and recreated Roman rooms to view.

Verulamium Park itself was a pleasant place to explore, with its ornamental lake, River Ver and the 'Inn on the Park' for refreshments. In the nearby St Michael's Church, founded in 948 (using Roman bricks in some of its construction) there is a monument to the Jacobean philosopher and politician Sir Francis Bacon and the remains of a medieval 'Doom' painting.

It was a very interesting and varied day, fortunately blessed with fine weather.

Anne Lamb

RAF Northolt - 4 September

A very interesting tour of the base was conducted by Squadron Leader Willis. We were given a brief history of the base from its early days and how it operated as London Airport after the war until Heathrow was built in 1953. It has increased substantially in the last 10 years as West Drayton, Mill Hill and Uxbridge bases have closed and most of their activities moved to Northolt. Operations at Northolt precede the Royal Air Force and began in 1915, when it was part of the Royal Flying Corps.

Our party of 24 was taken by bus to the hangars to see a BAE 125 under repair. We were allowed on board, six at a time, and realised that this plane is not the height of luxury! The term workhorse seemed more appropriate.

We visited the Polish Airforce room with many exhibits donated by Polish fliers and their families. A history of the Polish airmen fighting for Britain in the Battle of Britain in 1940 was on large panels on the walls, in amongst exciting paintings and drawings of aerial combat. Our attention was drawn to the fact that Polish airmen were the largest group after British airmen, taking part in the Battle of Britain.

Next we visited the VIP check-in centre, and in two very comfortable lounges heard about the problems to be had with protocol, deciding who has precedence when visiting Presidents or Royalty arrive together. Everyone has to go through the same checks as you or I would meet at Heathrow, but the aim is to board the plane within 15 minutes.

On to the bus again to the other side of the airport where the Keith Park Centre has the original operations room designed for World War II, with a raised platform which looks over the plotting table below. This area is being restored to its original condition as it has been used for many purposes since and is much changed, with walls removed and doors boarded up. Apparently the setup at Duxford was a copy of Northolt centre.

We saw some fascinating items in the small museum and heard the famous air raid siren (quietly). The group was shown a photograph of the aircraft that landed in Malvern Avenue, demolishing the front off the house. A tip of the propeller from that plane that was recently donated, and via eBay an original fire-bucket from Northolt in 1945 and a marvellous 24 hour clock with coloured sections which mimic the plotters markers have been acquired. When they excavated the floor at Uxbridge, many original markers from the plotting table, came to light!

Celia Smith

