

# SOCIETY OUTINGS 2014

Organised and Reported by Sue Holt *et alii*

## RAF Northolt - 6 March

After an introduction by Sqdn. Ldr. Richard Willis, Media and Communications Officer of the Airport, the 25 members of our group boarded a coach which was to be our transport for the tour under his guidance.

Our first port of call was Hanger No. 5 where a Queen's Flight BAE 125 was having a major overhaul. This aircraft was being given a 'second level' maintenance check, which still involves looking at every nut & bolt for wear and tear. This takes several months, so if the Queen needs to take a flight during this period, she may have to fly by British Airways.

The next stop was at the VIP check-in centre which guarantees to get passengers through security and onto their aircraft within fifteen minutes; there were no duty free shops, but two business lounges provided a comfortable wait before boarding. As leader of the group, I was allowed to sign the visitors' book. Nearby we visited the Polish Air Force lounge. Notable Battle of Britain Polish Airmen, from Polish Squadrons, who were based at RAF Northolt during WWII, are represented on wall panels. Relatives and friends of these men regularly visit and donate artefacts to the museum. Every year, serving members of the Polish Air Force meet in the lounge and at the Polish War Memorial to remember their predecessors.

Lastly we visited the Keith Park Centre where there is a WWII operations room. The room, including the plotting table and overlooking raised platform, has been sadly neglected over the last 70 years, but a dedicated group of volunteers are working to restore the building as far as possible to its operational condition.

Sue Holt

## Southwark Coaching Inns - 23 April

Modern times have not been kind to Borough High Street, Southwark, and its surroundings. World War Two bombs, new office blocks, and especially the ever increasing number of railway lines coming into London Bridge Station, have considerably altered the area.

Our walk first took us to Great Maze Pond Road, where the drovers used to rest their pigs,

sheep and cattle before driving them into the city across London Bridge to the market at Smithfield. The road now divides the buildings of Guy's Hospital. Thomas Guy was a governor of St Thomas' Hospital, but decided another hospital was needed in the area. St Thomas' was demolished when the railway was built, and relocated to the Thames South Bank opposite the Houses of Parliament. We noted a telephone box designed by Sir Gilbert Scott, and one of the arches of the old London Bridge which was erected in the garden of the hospital. Seated in the arch is a statue of John Keats who lived in the area. We saw the hospital's old Operating Theatre which was re-discovered in the 1950s.

We retraced our steps along St Thomas' street into Borough High Street, on the south side of which were once up to 20 coaching inns, although only the George Inn still exists. Several entrances into the various yards remain, some with gates, others with just the stone and wooden sidewalls that protected the brickwork from the wheels of the coaches. The George Inn is the only galleried Inn left in London. Passengers journeying to places like Dover, Canterbury and Plymouth would come across London Bridge and spend the night at the Inn, ready for their journey the following morning.

Guided group access was not permitted into Southwark Cathedral, but our guide was able to tell us a little of its history. The site has been a place of worship since the 13th century when a priory church was built. It only became a Cathedral in 1905 when the Anglican Diocese of Southwark was formed. In the grounds is an interesting sculpture carved by Peter Randall-Page, unveiled by HM the Queen in November 2006. The sculpture commemorates a Native American Chief whose helped settlers survive the cold and other Indian attacks when they landed in America. He came to England in 1735 to petition George II for the return of sacred native land, but unfortunately whilst here he died of smallpox.

After lunch we took a self-guided tour of the Cathedral. We celebrated Shakespeare's 450th birthday three days early; saw the memorial to the Marchioness Disaster and the Tomb of Bishop Lancelot-Andrewes who oversaw the translation of the King James version of the bible. The High

Alter and Great Screen were installed by Bishop Fox of Winchester in 1520. We also noted the Howard Chapel dedicated to John Howard who founded a university in America.

Sue Holt

### **Beaulieu Estate and Buckler's Hard - 24 May**

We enjoyed good weather for our two hour coach trip to the Beaulieu Estate, located in the heart of the New Forest National Park. The original settlement on the site was Beaulieu Abbey, founded in 1204 by thirty Cistercian monks, sent from France, on land gifted by King John. By the end of the century, there were over 200 men living and working in the Abbey precincts, including lay brothers and hired craftsmen. The Abbey Church was finally completed in 1246 when the monastery buildings were also then being built. The Church was once the largest in England, but little now remains. The Domus or living quarters of the lay brothers is one of the few Abbey buildings to survive intact, and it now houses an interesting exhibition including a short film about the Abbey's history. The first floor is used to display a colourful series of wall hangings, created by Belinda, Lady Montagu, (Lord Montagu's first wife). The embroideries tell the story of the Abbey, from its foundation to the Dissolution in 1538.

In June 1538 the 8000 acre Beaulieu Estate was purchased from King Henry VIII by Thomas Wriothesley, a leading royal servant, later to become the Earl of Southampton. He was also a direct ancestor of the present owners, the Montagus of Beaulieu. The life of the estate now centres on the Great Gatehouse, which was converted to a modest manor house, with the name Palace House. The first resident owner was the present Lord Montagu's grandfather, Lord Henry Scott, and major rebuilding work took place between 1871 and 1874. The present Lord Montagu opened Palace House to the public in 1952. The family still occupy the Victorian east wing of the house, and costumed house staff are on hand to give tours and information.

Many of our group went first to the National Motor Museum, the origins of which go back to 1952 with a display of veteran cars in front of Palace House. There are now over 300 vehicles and thousands of objects relating to motoring history, with two new galleries in 2014 on land speed records and a motorcycle gallery. Another place to visit was the Secret Army Exhibition,

which tells the fascinating story of the training establishment in the grounds and village, where Special Operations Executives were trained and sent to work with the Resistance in occupied Europe.

At 3 o'clock we took the short coach journey along the Beaulieu River to the picturesque village of Buckler's Hard. The Maritime Museum brought the village story to life, from the days of Nelson, when ships were built, some of which took part in the Battle of Trafalgar. The story continues to WWII, when segments of the Mulberry Harbour were built and towed to the Normandy coast, in preparation for D-Day. Hundreds of landing craft also sailed from the Beaulieu River to support the Normandy landings.

On the journey home we were bemused by a small herd of cows, ambling along the grass verge of a New Forest road, with no cowherd in sight! Fortunately the cows knew where they were going and headed into a field, allowing us to continue.

Anne Lamb

### **Bunhill Fields and Wesley's Chapel - 13 August**

After last year's visit to John Bunyan's birthplace in Elstow, and to Bedford where he preached and was jailed, we decided to visit Bunhill Fields, the site of his memorial. John Bunyan came to London in August 1688, but unfortunately he was caught in a storm and died a few days later. Being a dissenter he was not allowed to be buried in the church ground at Holborn. His remains were interned instead in the Dissenters burial ground at Bunhill Fields, City Road, London.

The Bunhill (or Bone Hill) field had been a burial ground since Saxon times and around 1549 cart-loads of human bones were taken there from St Paul's charnel house. In 1665 the City of London Corporation used the site for inhabitants who had died of the plague. The ground attracted many dissenters from the Established Church. These included Catholics, Jews, Methodists and Baptists. The Field was finally closed for burial in 1853, after 120,000 internments had taken place. An Act of Parliament in 1867 enabled the City Corporation to maintain the site, provided some of it was laid out as a public open space with seating and a garden. Bombing during WWII necessitated an expansion of the park area because of so much destruction to the graves.

Our guide took us around what remains of the graveyard, telling us the history of some of the inhabitants, and how they interacted with one another. Notable graves we visited were William Blake, two Cromwell tombstones related to Oliver Cromwell's family, Daniel Defoe and JB Tolkien, grandfather of the writer JRR Tolkien. Last of all we saw the recumbent figure of John Bunyan on his tomb.

After lunch, we crossed the road to Wesley's Chapel; first stop was John Wesley's house, which is a Georgian townhouse, three floors and a basement. Wesley moved into the house in 1770 and lived there on and off until he died in 1791. The basement consists of the kitchen, and a museum room including items of clothing owned by Wesley and his family.

The ground floor comprises the dining room and back parlour. On the first floor is John Wesley's bedroom, where he died, a study room and a small prayer room. The study was where Wesley would have written many of his letters and entertained guests; the bookcase contained many of Wesley's own books. The second floor was used by visiting preachers. The Museum of Methodism was the next port of call, which covers the history of the movement. You can see many personal belongings of John and his brother Charles, portraits of notable preachers and the pulpit from his first London chapel - the Foundry. The Foundry was used as a meeting place while the Chapel was being built in 1778. We noted it still contains some of the original wall panels and pews.

The Chapel was designed by George Dance the younger and built by Wesley. It was regarded as one of the finest Georgian buildings in London. The flags of the Commonwealth were hung inside the Chapel after the 2012 Olympic Games had finished to represent that Methodists can be found all over the world. Margaret Thatcher donated a new alter rail for the Chapel to protect the original which was becoming a little frail after 250 years. Finally we visited a small garden at the rear of the Chapel to see a monument erected to John Wesley.

Sue Holt

### **Stonehenge & Salisbury - 6 September**

The day before our outing, we saw the US President on television visiting Stonehenge under a grey sky. For us the sky was still grey but the solitary figure dwarfed by the huge stones was

replaced by a multitude walking around the perimeter and speaking many different tongues reminiscent of the busy London Underground. However the stones at a distance from us maintained an aura of aloof dignity and a sense of mystery about them. It was pleasurable just to look at them but the comprehensive audio guides also provided us with as much factual information as we chose to select, causing many of us to spend an hour or more walking round. A shuttle bus returned us to the new visitor centre about a mile away; where we spent time at an informative exhibition, inside some reconstructed Neolithic houses and visiting the gift shop, before leaving.

The sun came out as the coach drove away, and in less than half an hour we disembarked at Salisbury. The west facade of Salisbury Cathedral was gleaming in the light of the sunny afternoon and looked truly magnificent with the soaring spire beyond it. Those of us who went inside the Cathedral admired the tall narrow nave and beautifully preserved cloisters, and studied the copy of the Magna Carta exhibited in the Chapter House, which is the best of the four remaining original copies. The Charter is long and complex, so to fit it all into the confined space of the document, abbreviations and minute handwriting were used, the quality of which gave the document the appearance of a work of art.

The large expanse of Cathedral Close contains numerous other places of interest. Some of us went into the museum where we saw, amongst other things, in the newly opened and brilliantly laid out Wessex gallery, the Amesbury Archer beaker burial with gold and copper objects dating back over 4,000 years. Others visited Arundells, home of the late Edward Heath, and Mompesson House, a beautiful Queen Ann building. Also in The Close was The Wardrobe, a comprehensive regimental museum dedicated to 'The Rifles Berkshire and Wiltshire' and a Medieval Hall which was unfortunately but the latter was closed.

Further afield, some visited the Church of St Thomas and admired the amazing medieval paintings including the representation of Doom on the chancel arch, one of the largest such paintings in England. Around the town were many other interesting old and quaint buildings, and the recently repaved market square which was full of busy stalls.

A splendid day out was enjoyed by all, who agreed that Salisbury warrants a return visit.

Robert Trease