

To The Manor Born
Cricket St Thomas, June 2023

“Oh, we’re going down to Somerset,

Where the cider apples grow!”

Was the lusty cry on board our Sleafordian coach as cases were loaded, sunhats optimistically packed and boiled sweets got ready for quite a long journey to our destination, Cricket St Thomas, in beautiful Somerset. We departed promptly as everyone was extremely well organised. For example, when we stopped at Leicester to pick up Steve and Debbie, Steve had even sorted transport to take him back to his house in case he accidentally left Debbie’s hold- all there. Brian was so desperate to get there he even opened the middle door when the bus was moving. A new career as stunt man obviously awaits him!

It was a long drive, but soon the signs for Chard, the neighbouring town, appeared. Then we saw signs for our Warner’s hotel-but that was all we saw, as acres of beautifully kept grounds surrounded us as we travelled down the winding drive to the hotel. Was this really our base for 4 days? Then we saw the hotel, like something out of a TV costume drama- as in fact it was! I’m sure you’ll all remember the wonderful series with Peter Bowles and Penelope Keith, *To The Manor Born*? Well, it was set here. In fact, if you went into the Manor itself, you could see the sweeping grand staircase and also photos of the cast. It was a huge place, with an accommodation block, Manor, restaurant and entertainment venue. There was even a pool! This was *The Good Life* indeed. For four whole days!!

Having unpacked and explored our elegant rooms and surroundings, we headed down for our evening meal-more delightful surprises! There was a different menu every night, which included: starters, a deli bar, main course buffet plus a roast and desserts, including cheese and biscuits, normally extra. In addition to this, there was a fresh selection of chef’s specials every night. The buffet was themed daily-Italian, Malaysian, Indian etc and there was a different roast every night. The most stressful aspect of all this was choosing as the quality was universally superb. There were also THREE bars! Thoroughly replete, we staggered down to watch the entertainment which also was top quality. A young male singer called Will Vessey serenaded us beautifully for 30 minutes, followed by the hotel’s band, Distinction, which tried to get people up line dancing-too much food, sadly! The outstanding act for me was the hotel’s resident singers and dancers, who performed a range of tunes from musicals with impossibly quick costume changes. You could have been in the West End. An excellent first day. And so to bed!

Lyme Regis

After a very comfortable night’s rest in our spacious rooms, we headed down to an equally sumptuous breakfast- again spoilt for choice from a cooked breakfast to croissants, or your own choice of omelette cooked to order. The coach groaned at all this extra weight as off we set to this lovely little coastal town. Rain had been forecast but we saw no sign of it as we drove the short journey to the seaside. The lovely coastline stretched in front of us and

both sea and sky were equally blue. We had four hours here, plenty of time to wander through the narrow lanes, examining the quirky shops (including one selling clotted cream fudge. How could I still be hungry?) and cooling hot feet in the surprisingly warm sea.

This is the Jurassic coastline and there is a stretch of beach called the Ammonite Corridor, where you are very likely to find a fossil. Of course I didn't, but I brought back a rock anyway. If you look hard enough you just might see....well, to console myself I headed off to one of the lovely terrace bars overlooking the main beach for some well-earned refreshment and a crab sarnie. Being Indiana Jones is thirsty work!

We returned to the hotel slightly early at 3pm, as there was so much of the grounds still to explore. They had several marked walks, including one which meandered along the river, with hidden grottos and statues to surprise you. Another drink on the terrace bar, quick change, then down to our second night of superb food and excellent entertainment. Another wonderful day.

Cheddar Gorge/ Wells

Today was the only day we had rain, and then only a couple of showers, which didn't matter as we were underground. Now, the last time I was at Cheddar Gorge was in the 60s with my parents, (I was just a foetus!) so it was with a sense of wonder that I saw again the towering cliffs of the Gorge. Stewart navigated the twisting route through with his usual skill and thus enabled us to see much more than by walking. We then had the chance to go into Gough's Cave, which is the largest. Now I'm not much of a speleologist (cave explorer-I had to look this up) but they had an offer on-Cave and Cake. I felt I could endure the cave for the free cake as did many of our group, so we boldly went into the darkness.

In fact, the caves were huge and the audio guide kept you entertained, so you forgot the claustrophobic feelings you might have had earlier. The limestone rock formations were stunning and beautifully lit. Some caves were likened to cathedrals like St Paul's, they were so vast in scale. It was truly fascinating.

In the afternoon we had a change of plan. We were originally going to Glastonbury, but it was feared the traffic would be horrendous as the festival was due to start. Instead, we went to Wells. Brian was gutted. He had extended his musical repertoire from 1 to 2 in preparation for his appearance on the Pyramid Stage. Next year, Brian! Wells was a lovely, rambling town, with more quirky shops and lanes to explore. The Cathedral was immense. It has been a holy site since 705AD, but the present Gothic masterpiece was begun in 1175. My favourite part was the Astronomical Clock, built in 1390, which had jousting knights at the top. These appear every 15 minutes, but it's the same poor old knight that gets knocked down every time. Imagine enduring that for 600 years! And so back to the bus for another evening of eating, drinking, laughing- it's a hard life on an REA trip!

Exmouth/ Exeter

We headed off to our first destination on a gloriously hot and sunny day. Exmouth is a lovely coastal town with miles of sandy beach. Families were everywhere, armed with buckets and spades, and the seagulls waited expectantly for tit bits. We chose to do a round trip to Sandy Bay on the open top bus, which was accessible with a bus pass. This let us see the coastline to its best advantage, plus something of the small town itself. At Sandy Bay the bus

stopped, and there was a café with a lovely terraced bar for refreshments-and more seagulls!

And then to Exeter. Time was limited here due largely to the heat and many were forced into the shops -just for air conditioning! We opted to visit Exeter Cathedral, built even earlier in 1133, which is currently undergoing extensive renovations. There was still plenty to see including amazing mediaeval tombs. And so, back to our lovely hotel for our last evening, which did not disappoint. There was beautifully cooked roast beef, an Indian buffet, a bottle of wine from the Club on our table and a new show by the hotel's own troupe of entertainers, called *Rouge et Noir*. Feather fans, basques and bustles were at the heart of this tribute to Burlesque.

Bath and home

It was with some regret that we said goodbye to our lovely hotel. It had been a very special four days there. But more was yet to come. By leaving early, we were able to spend 2 and a half hours in Bath on the way back. With the help of Google Maps, we found the Circus and the iconic Royal Crescent. We found the Jane Austen Museum-but sadly Mr Darcy failed to put in an appearance. His loss! I managed to have a tour of the famous Roman baths. Again, my last visit was decades ago and I was very impressed by the research which has gone into the site, now with an audio guide, video representations of Roman life and a super gift shop. I even found a shop which sold REAL fudge-proper tablet! It's solid sugar and 1,000 calories a mouthful, but it's lovely. Then back to the coach and home.

I have almost written a novel myself here. Sadly, I'm no Jane Austen, but I wanted to do justice to a fantastic holiday. Everything was perfect: the location, the hotel, the trips-everything- and it was excellent value for money. Many, many thanks are due to the organisers- Steve, Debbie, Chris, Brian and the heroic baggage handlers who dealt with our suitcases. Thanks to Stewart, who dealt with every type of road with confidence and skill, even the narrow Devon variety. But remember, we are all "to the manor born "now. A very high bar has been set. I can't wait for the next trip, wherever it goes, but if Mr Darcy could also be a guest.....??

Barbara Pearce.