

The Twelve Days of Christmas

@ Belvoir Castle, 13th December

Our last trip of the year really put us in the festive mood. Firstly, we had a nice, late departure time of 10am, so that we could gather our thoughts and have a last coffee before leaving. It was *the season to be jolly* as we had Stewart at the helm, and Jolly happens to be his surname. Perfect!

Our first stop was at the Downtown Retail Park near Grantham, so it was possibly just as well our time there was limited. It is a huge complex of shops. Downstairs has everything you could wish for, from an extensive selection of household goods and furnishings to designer clothes items at much reduced prices. I looked at a waterproof dog-walking coat by Tog24 and it was reduced from £129 to £60! There was a wide selection of thermal items at the tills-can't have too much of those! The café, too, was clean, light and very reasonably priced. Thus fortified, we moved upstairs, where we found more big-brand shops. Not all had discounts, but if you kept your eyes open, you'd find them. Then, at 12.15, back on the coach to meet Steve and Debbie at nearby Belvoir Castle.

Although it was dry, it was gloomy and overcast so we did not see the exterior of the castle at its best, but it was still impressive. Named Belvoir (pronounced Beaver) from the French meaning "beautiful view," it was easy to see why. From its commanding position on its hilltop, its defenders could easily see any enemies approaching and its current owners are offered panoramic views of the surrounding countryside. The first castle was built there after the Norman Conquest and it was finally modernised into a "mock castle" in the 19th century. It is the seat of David Manners, the 11th Duke of Rutland. Lucky so and so!

Although there were no lights outside the castle, inside was a wonderland! This year's theme was the Twelve Days of Christmas, which used to be a grand holiday culminating on Twelfth Night, or January 5th. As you wandered through these magnificent rooms, you were walking through a living storybook. First, you passed a huge Christmas tree in the entrance then through a passageway of smaller trees to the Guard Room, where a huge tree awaited, decked in pink with white swans. Twelve Lords were leaping and eleven ladies were dancing around it. Two roaring log fires heated the area and indeed the castle was warm throughout. Then you climbed up a beautifully decorated, sweeping stairway to the next floor.

It is very difficult to pick a favourite room, as they were all spectacular. Ten drummers drummed in The Ballroom, beautifully back lit with blue and orange. The State Dining Room table was a feast for the eyes, with swans and geese the theme here. Garlands festooned the table and huge bouquets of foliage decorated every surface. The Picture Gallery and The King's Rooms were indeed fit for monarchs such as King George IV. Here, calling birds were everywhere, matching the priceless Chinoiserie wallpapers. The stunning finale was the Regents Gallery, where a partridge rested on a silver pear tree, surrounded by the Lord and Lady of Misrule, who could command even real aristocracy during these festivities. How many wonderful traditions we have!

The two, beautifully decorated tearooms provided welcome sustenance after all this. Then there was a gift shop and, if you had the energy, a 10 minute walk took you to The Engine

Yard Retail Village, where more temptations awaited. By this time credit cards were smoking! As the weather was drawing in, the decision was made to leave a little early and we were home just after five, having miraculously avoided the usual seasonal traffic jams.

A big thank you must go to all organisers, Steve, Brian, Chris and of course our Jolly driver Stewart, not only for a lovely day out, but for all their hard work throughout the year. Have a wonderful Christmas everyone, recharge your batteries, and get ready for the fabulous trips on offer for 2024. Off to put my credit card in the fridge!

Barbara Pearce.