

Oooop North @Nidd Hall

July Holiday

After last year's superb holiday at Cricket St Thomas, we were all looking forward to our next Warner's adventure at Nidd Hall near Harrogate. The itinerary was excellent as always (more of that later) but the weather was looking very unpredictable. Waterproofs and fleeces were to prove vital in the coming days. With our trusty driver Stewart at the helm, we set off for our adventure into darkest Yorkshire. Would there be dragons??

As we couldn't get into the hotel till 3pm, we had our first stop at Knaresborough, described as "a hidden gem of Yorkshire." And so it proved to be. It had a castle, Mother Shipton's Cave and the Petrifying Well. Who could ask for more? After a brief walk round the ruins of the castle, we set off for Mother Shipton's Cave. They did warn us there were steps...and more steps...and still more steps. After the flat county of Lincoln this came as a shock to the legs, but the views were worth it. The famous site was well signposted so we reached it easily, at the same time as what seemed the combined school population of Yorkshire. The walk to the cave was about a mile along the banks of the River Nidd, a beautiful setting. And yes, there were more steps. We passed Captain Hook's Cave, home of the Lost Boys, and loads of fun places for children. There were soft tree trunks where you could hammer in a coin and make a wish. Mine was that the rain would stay off. It didn't work!

Mother Shipton's Cave claims to be England's oldest tourist attraction, opened in 1630. Born there as Ursula Sontheil in 1488 to a 15 year old mother, father unknown, she was raised there for some time. She was a strange, ugly, reclusive child, so returned to the cave for her own safety. She married Tobias Shipton, but was happiest learning about nature, plants and herbal medicines and soon acquired a reputation as a wise woman and prophetess. It is said she prophesied the Great Fire of London and iron ships. The cave itself is tiny, and it is hard to believe a human being ever lived there. The waters of the adjacent Petrifying Well are also legendary and you can make a wish there too. Strings of little teddies were hanging there to be petrified, which I thought was cruel! Fortunately there was a bus service back to town, where we availed ourselves of one of the many hostelries before departing for our hotel.

Like our previous Warner's hotel, this one was stunning. The drive seemed to go on forever through overhanging trees, while sheep placidly grazed nearby (in future referred to as dinner!) The hall itself is a 19th century country house, a Grade 11 listed building. It is set in stunning grounds, with tennis court, water garden, lake and croquet lawn. Inside it was like a rabbit warren, and it took many of us some time to successfully navigate its winding corridors. The rooms were spacious and light, towels fluffy, beds comfy-all we needed now was dinner! As before, the food was fantastic: a choice of starters; deli counter with a huge variety of salads and cold meats; a selection of main courses, each evening with a different country of origin and roast meat. As for the desserts.....! Thank goodness there were no bathroom scales anywhere to be seen.

After a fabulous meal, we decided to stroll through the grounds. Everywhere you went there were lovely, cosy pods to sit in and a fantastic terrace. Sadly, the evenings proved too chilly to make the most of it all. There were loads of very fat ducks- later I discovered why when I fed them toast. They were feral! Heaven help your legs if you had no food. Elegant swans sailed serenely across the water and there were squirrels and rabbits galore. The landscaped gardens were beautifully laid out wherever you looked. Then, a visit to the bar and the evening entertainment beckoned. As with last time, the standard was excellent, particularly the resident band, Northern Lights, who worked tirelessly to end the evening with a swing. Their first concert, Rock of Stages, certainly had us on the dance floor with two belting Tina Turner numbers and a medley from Queen. And so to our comfy beds.

The next morning was overcast, but the skies soon cleared as we made our way to that fabulous fishing port, Whitby. I have been there many times, but never tire of exploring its cobbled lanes and the magnificent ruins of the abbey. If you wanted a crab sandwich or fish and chips, you had come to the right place. We decided to tackle the 199 steps to the abbey, Knaresborough having started my training regime and I had a huge cooked breakfast to work off! (Have I mentioned the fabulous food?) There have been communities on that headland for over 3,000 years, but it was St Hild in 657 who established the first monastery there. Sadly, Henry VIII and the First World War destroyed this magnificent building, but the spectacular ruins still reflect its past grandeur, especially the fantastic carvings and arched windows. The on-site museum tells you a great deal about its long-standing religious importance.

Possibly its most famous association is with Bram Stoker's gothic horror *Dracula*. He visited Whitby in 1890 and discovered a book in the public library about Vlad the Impaler, who killed captives on stakes, also known as Dracula- and the rest is literary history. The abbey setting inspired so much of the novel and it seems some tourists ask for their money back when they can't find Dracula's grave!! After all this exploring, the abbey's café provided much-needed sustenance for the journey downhill. There were shops selling the famous Whitby jet, Queen Victoria's favourite, tablet, ice cream and much more. When we rejoined the coach, we discovered some intrepid members of our party had gone out on the pirate ship for a lively 20 minute trip on an aquatic roller coaster. I hope this was BEFORE their fish and chips!

With superb planning, our guides had held the rain off till the journey back and we felt we had earned our dinners after all our step aerobics. The highlight of the evening was a session with Ben Nickless, a finalist in 2020's *Britain's Got Talent*. You could understand why as the audience roared at his impersonations and very physical comedy. Who could forget his impression of an Elvis Presley record slowing down on the turntable or Dolly Parton's talking/singing boobs! And so to bed after another wonderful day.

Wednesday was a free day, so some went to York by train, some stayed to enjoy the luxury of our hotel, whilst some went with Stewart to explore Harrogate itself. It is a Georgian jewel, having achieved popularity as a spa town when the healing properties of its waters were discovered in the 17th/18th centuries. In its heyday, 15,000 people would visit every summer. If you visited the Royal Pump Room Museum, you could see the horrendous treatments that were on offer to hardy Victorians. Rather than me! Another claim to fame for Harrogate lies with the famous mystery writer, Agatha Christie. In 1926, Agatha Christie abandoned her car and disappeared for 11 days, turning up at the Old Swan Inn in Harrogate, claiming amnesia after a car accident. You can see a plaque on the hotel walls telling the story.

Food, you will notice, features largely in this account, so I must mention the Fat Rascal. No, not Brian! No visit to Harrogate would be complete without a treat in the iconic Betty's Tea Room, where fantastic cakes and scones are served with your choice of beverage, on beautiful crockery, by waitresses in traditional uniforms. Very civilised. The Fat Rascal is a mammoth fruity scone, decorated with a wrinkled cherry and almond face. You felt you were eating E.T! The only disadvantage is the toilets involve even more stairs! Then there were the Harlow Carr Gardens or shops to explore before returning to the hotel. A taste of Italy awaited us at the buffet as well as roast gammon. The entertainment was provided by a fabulous singer in a sparkling, black evening gown. Jenny Williams has starred at the Proms and the Stars Sing for Charity concert. Once again, a top class performer. And so to bed- using the lift this time whilst worrying about its weight limit!

Thursday's trip was to Ripon, another unknown for me. Mr Google suggested a visit to the cathedral, and I'm so glad we did. It was stunning. What made the visit even more magical was a rehearsal in the choir of a concert, to be held that evening starring a magnificent tenor. His voice soared to the vaulted roof with its embossed carvings, emphasising the magnificent acoustics. Founded as a

monastery in the 660s, its crypt is the oldest in England, dating from 672. The atmosphere there was intense despite its small size. You felt the full weight of history there. Another revelation was the connection with *Alice in Wonderland*. Lewis Carroll's father was Canon of the cathedral and Lewis was very familiar with the strange carvings on the misericords, the hard wooden seats. One is of a gryphon chasing a rabbit down a rabbit hole! Sounding familiar?

There was time to explore the quaint market town, which turned out to be the site of the Uprising of the North in 1569, which was brutally suppressed. It is so true that, wherever you go in this country, there is history of some kind on your doorstep. Then it was off to the Black Sheep Brewery in Masham for our tour. Once Stewart managed to secure a parking space (some drivers couldn't read the sign *coaches only*!) we went inside to await our guides. The "Black Sheep" turned out to be the founder, Paul Theakston, who did not agree with the sale of the family business to a rival. He started out on his own and soon established a formidable reputation. He is now joined by his two sons. After an informative guide to brewing, it was time for free samples- and you got three! The gale force wind, which had been gusting all day, did manage to cause a power cut- but you can drink just as well in the dark. I'll bet quite a few got lost in the hotel on their return after those freebies.

After another wonderful buffet of curries and roast beef, Northern Lights entertained us with musical hit numbers from *Hairspray* and *Grease*, amongst others. This evening we had also to think about packing up, sadly. The time had gone so fast! You really got to feel at home there and the staff members were pleasantness personified.

Our journey home included a visit to Skipton, where we had over four hours to explore. It always hosts a fantastic market with many bargains to be had. There are also very relaxing boat trips along the Liverpool/Leeds Canal, where swans and goslings pursued you, desperate for a treat or two from the bird food on sale. Skipton also hosts a magnificent mediaeval castle, arguably the best preserved of its time. Robert Clifford was granted the property in 1310, only to be killed at Bannockburn. The castle held out during the Civil War but was eventually captured. It regained prominence under the rule of the formidable matriarch Lady Anne Clifford, who also planted the ancient yew tree in the courtyard in 1659. The great hall and kitchens seemed very light and modern for their time. Back to Skipton's many cafes and then to the coach for our return.

This time, sadly, the traffic gods were against us, and Stewart needed the patience of a saint to endure the interminable string of red lights that meant it took 90 minutes to reach the motorway. Then the traffic flowed normally, so we were not too late coming back. Thank you, Stewart, for once again driving us so safely and comfortably, particularly navigating the narrow entrance into the hotel drive. You are a star!

This review is rather long- sorry, folks- but I wanted to highlight the amazing places these holidays uncover for you. Everything is run smoothly; your cases are loaded and unloaded for you and timings are clear. This trip for me was especially good as I had plenty of time to explore new places, always a bonus, and rediscover the beauties of what some claim to be "God's Own Country." Whilst I as a Scot would dispute that, it was impossible not to admire the rolling hills and sweeping grandeur of the Yorkshire moors. Warner hotels are first class and a welcome haven after a busy day and the get-togethers in the evening help us get to make new friends. Many, many thanks to Jane, Chris and Brian for all their endeavours on our behalf and I can't wait till the November trip- Oh, and have I mentioned the food?

Barbara Pearce.

