

Lichfield

I had never heard of Lichfield. But this is why I value REA excursions so much-they boldly go where no Pearce has gone before! In this case, I was dazzled by the stunning Cathedral, the cultural history and wonderful Georgian architecture of this Staffordshire city.

The sun was supposed to come out-it took its time, finally appearing mid- afternoon. We arrived at 10 30; some headed off for a warming coffee to offset the cool breeze, whilst others headed for the Cathedral. It is unique as it is the only mediaeval cathedral to have three spires. The reason for these varies: showing off the wealth of the area under King Offa of Mercia (of Offa's Dyke fame); the Holy Trinity or the three bishoprics of the time. Who can say? The building material of Mercian red sandstone was locally sourced. The interior is also astonishing, including three modern icons of Christ on the Cross, the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary, richly decorated with gold leaf. This was the burial place of St Chad, a man of the people, who frequently refused to be given a horse (the Rolls Royce of his day) as he felt it gave him ideas above his station! His chapel once contained his head and arm-not there now, I'm glad to say, his bones having been sent round the country for healing purposes. The St Chad's gospels are on display, as are the beautiful Flemish stained glass windows in the Lady Chapel, fortunate survivors of the extensive damage Lichfield received during the Civil War.

Duly fortified by a cheese and onion toastie and BBQ baguette, we sallied forth to sample Lichfield's other delights. And there were many! Next to the Cathedral is Erasmus Darwin's museum and herb garden. Now, this gent was grandad to our Evolutionary friend Charles but also a very clever man in his own right, being a doctor, inventor and poet. He used to treat his patients with herbs from his garden, often free of charge. His inventions included a steering mechanism for his carriage, which was used in cars a century later, a copying machine and an artificial larynx! Sadly, the museum was closed on Wednesdays, but a good excuse for a repeat visit.

Another famous son of Lichfield is Dr Samuel Johnson, outstanding speaker, writer and influencer of his age. (Wonder how many "likes" he'd get?) He was the first lexicographer, producing an English dictionary of almost 15,000 words, the first to use phrases to illustrate meaning. Born in Lichfield in 1709, the museum there, also his birthplace, reflects the poverty that pursued him for much of his early life. There were fascinating exhibits which gave you a real flavour of life in the 18th century. Fortunately, Dr Johnson acquired fame and fortune in his later years, even having his biography written by his long-time friend, James Boswell. By the time he died in 1784 he was at the centre of London's intellectual circle, mixing with the famous writers, painters and actors of his day, including David Garrick, an 18th century David Tennant. (Sigh!)

By now the sun was out and it was a perfect afternoon to wander the lovely, winding closes, discover wonderful street names and historic buildings and dip into the shops. It was also a

good time to return for a last glimpse of the Cathedral, its red sandstone now glowing in the rich golden light of this warm September afternoon.

It was time to go back on the coach to relax and chat about yet another REA voyage of discovery. Do check out the list of trips for 2025, maybe do a little research, and you, too, could be pleasantly surprised at what you can discover almost on your doorstep. Thanks to Jane, Chris, Brian, Stewart and all those who make these wonderful days possible.

Barbara Pearce