

A White Christmas @ Alvaston Hall, Nantwich

If, indeed, that was what you were dreaming about, then all your wishes would have come true at our marvellous Turkey and Tinsel break at Warners Alvaston Hotel in November. We left early at 8 30 on the 18th, and everyone was glued to the weather forecast on their phones. After a long spell of unseasonably warm, dry weather, it looked like winter was about to catch up with us at last. Perfect timing! As Stewart loaded the last of the Arctic survival packs, we set off for ASDA, then to our first stop, Chester.

Chester is an amazing walled city, full of fabulous shops and buildings. Founded by the Romans in 79 AD, it is steeped in history and has a wonderful, cosmopolitan atmosphere. Its city walls are almost totally intact and are Grade 1 listed. It has a sizeable cathedral and also an enticing series of raised levels of shops called The Rows, impressive in mock Tudor black and white. The Beale Memorial Clock Tower dominates the High Street and its clock is the most photographed after Big Ben, quite a claim to fame! But the magnet for most of us was the Christmas market with its rows of enticing stalls, lights cheerily twinkling in the gathering dusk. You could buy ornaments, fudge, mulled wine, fudge, woolly accessories-and fudge! (Two guesses what I bought!) As we returned to our coach, we were ready to check in, unpack and settle down to four days of luxury!

The entrances to Warners hotels are generally impressive, and this one did not disappoint, with its curving driveway and decorated doorway. The Victorian, half-timbered hotel dominated its 41 acres of grounds, its brick façade glowing in the bright red sunset. As we entered, mince pies and wine awaited us and Christmas trees glowed in every corner, as did the warm, coal fires. The bedrooms were comfortable and spacious and the beds very tempting indeed. However, I set out to explore the grounds to stretch my legs. Two features of interest stood out. One was a moving memorial to six soldiers who died nearby when defusing an unexploded bomb in WWII. A message had been left by one of the families, recognising their sacrifice. Further down the drive there were three statues: one Roman, one industrial and one military, illustrating the rich history of the area. Back in the warmth, I noticed an Old Italian motto over the fireplace in Reception: *Ad Ogni Ucello Suo Nido E Bello*. Roughly translated, it means "to each bird its own nest is beautiful," which seemed to sum up the great care with which the hotel had been decorated to welcome weary guests.

The food and entertainment at previous Warners breaks have been excellent and Alvaston continued this tradition with varied menus, buffet selections and different roasts every night. Despite my overindulgence in fudge, I was able to do full justice to the lean roast ham. This time, our meal tables were adjacent to the main stage, so we had good seats for the shows every evening. Our first night was spent in the company of Dan Smith, the Entertainments Manager and fine vocalist, followed by the resident band, The Blackjacks. The main show was *Musicals Now*, performed by the Warner Theatre Company, when they gave a West End standard performance of classics from *Les Mis* and *Hairspray*, amongst others. If this was not to your taste, there was entertainment in the Fountain Bar or you could just simply relax in one of the many cosy nooks spread throughout the hotel. In hotel terms it was Christmas Eve, so imagine our delight when, on retiring to our rooms, we looked out to see the snow softly falling, covering the ground with a dusting of white. Our White Christmas had arrived!

We woke the next morning to a true winter landscape. A couple of inches of snow had now fallen and was still coming down during breakfast, so we delayed our departure to let the roads clear. It was extremely cold so we were very grateful for our bacon and eggs! On our way, we passed a very large statue of Paddington Bear on a local hillside, complete with suitcase, looking rather forlorn. Our destination today was Liverpool and, as always, it was so difficult to decide what to prioritise in that vibrant city. You have the open top bus tours; the Beatles Experience; the ferry across the Mersey; two astonishing cathedrals; The Cavern; shops and the bustling Albert Docks area. What to choose? I opted for the open top bus tour despite the Arctic temperatures. Through the icicles

hanging from my fringe, I was able to appreciate the marvellous range of architecture on display. Liverpool has had mixed fortunes. Once “the second city of the Empire,” it suffered very badly in the Blitz and its shipping heritage fell into decline. But then came The Mersey Beat and four young men with sharp suits and floppy fringes changed the world of music for ever. Their statue still dominates the frontage of the Museum of Liverpool and is a must for selfies! The two Liver Bird statues grace the skyline, each the height of a double decker bus. The legend is that, if they fly away, Liverpool will crumble, which is possibly why they are tied down by strong steel cables.

We also saw Paddy’s Wigwam, the Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral with its unique design, and the huge Anglican cathedral overlooking the Mersey. Liverpool has the largest Chinese gate outside that country, due to its large Chinese population, and you might recognise certain parts of Gotham City as you drive round, *Batman* being just one of the many films using this remarkable city as their location. After defrosting in the Fab Four café, I headed for the ferry, with Gerry Marsden’s haunting hit ringing over the loudspeakers. This trip gave you remarkable views of the skyline and the Anglican Cathedral, and showed you much of Liverpool’s industrial past...and present, as the *Sir David Attenborough* polar research ship is being built in Birkenhead. I saw it! I felt as if The North Pole was where I’d just been when I disembarked! And so back to the hotel, to warm fires and mulled wine. Bliss. The Birkenhead connection continued that evening when we were entertained once more by The Blackjacks, but also a comedienne from Birkenhead, whose slightly risqué humour rounded off a tiring but most enjoyable day. The snow was still glinting in the outside lights as we headed off to bed.

Wednesday was a free day. Many chose to stay in the warmth of the hotel and enjoy its facilities or try their hands at archery or axe throwing! I wonder who volunteered to be the target? Others chose to catch the local bus to the nearby town of Nantwich. Several of us chose this option and we were very glad we did, as it was a fascinating place. Many of the buildings had the typical black and white façade so typical of Shropshire. The tower of St Mary’s Church was a focal point, so we headed there. Dating from the 14th century, it is regarded as one of the finest mediaeval churches in the country with many original wooden carvings. Nantwich proved to be a treasure trove of history, its museum showing how the Romans used the area to obtain their salt. Relics from the Civil War were also on display. It even had its own Great Fire in 1583, started by a local brewer (too many free samples?) and Queen Elizabeth 1 was responsible for much of the town’s reconstruction. Despite frequent stops at local hostelrys, the intense cold drove us back to the hotel bar. That night, Jeff Hooper entertained us with songs and stories from his very colourful career in entertainment.

On Thursday, our trusty chauffeur Stewart collected us for the 90 minute drive to the Black Country Living Museum near Dudley. Now, I often have mixed feelings about these places, as I recognise all too many aspects of the past displayed and feel like a walking exhibit myself. Still, this wonderful place did go back to the Industrial Revolution, which predates even me! My first exploration was a mistake. We saw an advert for a canal and cavern boat trip, so off I went, expecting a lovely, if chilly, vista of canal boats and blue sky. After 5 minutes, however, we were underground, as the tour demonstrated how the raw materials from the quarries were transported by tunnel to their individual destinations. To make matters worse, we were joined by 20 school children who were determined to test the acoustics of the caves by screaming as loudly as possible. I just wished they had listened to the commentary, which would have told them that children their age were working in those horrendous conditions, twelve hours a day, six days a week. It was a sobering thought as I could barely stand it for 40 minutes. Life was cruel then for the working population of all ages and genders. This was reinforced by a trip inside the mine there. We are very lucky to live as we do now.

After a reviving lunch, we explored above ground, which I much preferred. The Elephant and Castle pub had the most amazing tiled walls and stained glass windows and the shops were selling the kind of radio and TV sets I well remember. Who would have thought then you would ever carry all the

entertainment you needed in your pocket or handbag! We saw the Iron Foundry, where hammer heads were made, one of which was supposedly used in the televised experiment on the moon, when it was dropped with a feather to demonstrate the absence of gravity. As an ex teacher, I loved my visit to St James's School, where there were benches, blackboards and a big sign saying "Silence is Golden." I should have taken that with me on the canal boat! After a long moan about "kids today" with the schoolmaster, Mr Ball, I joined the others on the coach to depart for New Year's Eve.

The quality of the food and entertainment had been very good throughout our stay, but tonight they pushed the boat out in style! After a fabulous meal of smoked salmon, roast beef with all the trimmings and mulled fruit pavlova, we were ready to work off some calories on the dance floor. Complete with paper hats and crackers, the party was in full swing as the Blackjacks began their set. Then we were treated to *Rock of Ages*, another superb show by the Warners Theatre Company. Classic rock numbers from Tina and many others had us all tapping our feet, then came the dancing leading up to midnight (half past ten.) Silver and black balloons cascaded from the ceiling as we headed into Auld Lang Syne and the Hokey Cokey. Another brilliant night!

It was really sad leaving Alvaston Hall and its lovely staff on Friday, but once Stewart and his band of little helpers had loaded our cases, we were off, calling at Shrewsbury on our route home. Apparently the Saxons are responsible for the amount of hills you have to climb as you explore, building little religious settlements on scrubby hilltops which eventually moulded into one. It was a frequent battleground for Welsh and English forces, hence its formidable castle and city walls. Shrewsbury was captured by the Parliamentarian forces in 1645 when a traitor let them in through a small gate. The stunning architecture varies from mediaeval and Tudor to Georgian and Victorian. One of the most amazing buildings is the Henry Tudor Inn, built in 1429! History is everywhere in this fascinating town.

Shrewsbury has two famous sons. Robert Clive, better known as Clive of India, was born in Shropshire and lived in the town as a child. He was also the Mayor of the town and its MP until his death and his statue dominates the Market Square. Charles Darwin spent his childhood years in Shrewsbury and studied at the town school. This he hated and he soon set off for his famous voyage of discovery in The Beagle (he was an ardent dog lover and owner) at only 22 years of age! His school is now the library and he sits there, sculpted in stone with his back to it- says it all, really! There were many fabulous religious buildings to explore, including the Abbey, founded in 1083 but now partly ruined, which I did not have time to see. Shrewsbury Cathedral is a magnificent building, particularly due to the stunning windows created by the unique artist Margaret Rope, with her innovative use of coloured glass. Her work is even on display in The Vatican. My favourite had to be St Mary's Church, with its magnificent mediaeval glass windows stunning the eye, particularly the huge Jesse window, dating from the 14th century. Its timbered roof was astonishing and it still has one of the tallest spires in England. So much still to see- but time to go home, Andy Pandey!

This was a fantastic trip despite the cold. To paraphrase the Fab Four in praise of our Fab Four:

With Jane and her crew

Brian, Chris R and Stew

You know we'll feel all right

You know we'll be all riiiiight!

Thank you all so much, and Merry Christmas to everyone when it *really* comes.

Barbara Pearce

