

Welcome to Ely-The Island of Eels

Thursday 16th July

Yes indeed, that is where the name originates, from the fact that the local fenland was so prolific in the creatures, you just had to put your hands in any water system and you would find plenty. Now that they are, unbelievably, an endangered species, perhaps not! On yet another scorcher, we headed off to Cambridgeshire to explore this quaint city.

Like Lincoln, Ely's magnificent Cathedral dominated the landscape, though not quite to the same extent. As everyone set off to explore, we made this our first port of call and were lucky enough to join a free guided tour, to learn more about this beautiful building. It first became a holy site when Etheldreda, a Saxon Queen, founded a church and monastery there in 673. Subsequently, William the Conqueror began a grandiose extension, which continued until good old Henry VIII began the dissolution of all religious buildings. Only one small portion of the original stained glass remains. Fortunately, the Victorians undertook its restoration and further repairs continued last century. Now it stands proudly once more, a place of community activities and worship.

There are so many highlights, like the Octagon Tower, which replaced the original that collapsed in 1322. Regarded as a wonder of the medieval world, it looked surprisingly modern with its lantern of 200 tons of English oak and the same amount of lead. The Lady Chapel is the largest of its kind in the UK, with the most amazing acoustics, even better than the Albert Hall. We had a visiting chorister in our group who demonstrated this beautifully. It contained a modern sculpture of Mary, a marmite artwork. You could either think of it as an empowering representation of womanhood or a tribute to Britney Spears. Very controversial. The Nave Ceiling is as astonishing in its way as the roof of the Sistine Chapel, its religious figures being larger than life and painted in situ. There was also a fabulous portrait of William and Kate in the nave, looking very regal indeed.

But we all know the importance of hydration breaks, so we then adjourned to the nearby Almonry Kitchen for much-needed sustenance beneath the shade of its fabulous vaulted roof, then out into the sunshine to explore further. Oliver Cromwell's House and Museum reflects his 10 years in the city, before becoming MP for Cambridge and Lord Protector of England. However, the glorious weather enticed us outside and down to the river Great Ouse, where ducks dived, geese glided, boats bobbed and ice cream vans beckoned. Then followed a leisurely stroll through the market place, admiring the varied architecture of this enchanting city.

Once again, we were fortunate to have had five hours to explore, so we were able to tick all the boxes and still be on time for the coach. Stewart's aqua bar was doing brisk business. We had a smooth and speedy run home and were all delighted with what we had seen. Thanks to Jane, Chris, Brian and Stewart once again for another fabulous day out. The icing on the cake would have been an English victory at football. Sadly, you can't have everything it seems.

Barbara Pearce