

Welcome to Althorp House

The Home of *The People's Princess*.

I think we were all especially excited at the thought of this trip. Everyone remembers Diana, her beauty, charisma and kindness. I think we also remember the day we heard of her tragic, untimely death. To see where she spent her early years was a privilege, so we eagerly boarded the coach for our August trip. After a brief stop we arrived at Althorp slightly early. We were all a bit surprised at being denied admittance and having to wait at the gate for that measly 10 minutes. Fortunately, that was the last hiccup in a wonderful day and the staff proved helpful and informative.

The Spencers came to prominence in the reign of James 1 and have never looked back. Althorp has been home to the Spencer family for more than 500 years. Although the house retains its original shape, it was made of red brick which the Second Earl found unfashionable and unworthy of his high position in society. He commissioned the A-listers of his time to transform it into a true stately home and gradually the family acquired a dazzling array of objets d'art, a world class collection of portraits, miniatures, porcelain and fine furniture, to adorn it. There was a whole wall devoted to works by Sir Joshua Reynolds, including a portrait of The Red Earl in Wimbledon Common (no Wombles to be seen though.) There are over 400 paintings in total! I can't remember seeing so many in close proximity. You were completely dazzled.

It is hard to describe the interior grandeur of the rooms with their stunning views of the grounds. They have housed many kings and queens in their time, such as William III, Queen Mary and George V. The Marlborough Room or State Dining Room has a Victorian rosewood dining table 36 feet in length (definitely not from IKEA) which can seat 42 people. It was laid with dazzling white linen and glistening glasses. Even smaller rooms like The Garden Room contained treasures, such as the priceless Meissen chocolate set- for -one made for Marie Antoinette.

Treasure trove as Althorp undoubtedly is, it is also a family home and that came over in so many ways. There were family photographs and sketches everywhere, including one featuring a very young but already beautiful Princess Diana. You could trace the family resemblance very clearly through her grandmother, close friend to the Queen Mother. Diana moved to Althorp from Sandringham when her father inherited the estate. Portraits of herself, her brother and her beloved father dominate the oak staircase. I loved the fact that a huge dining table was moved out of one room so that a bouncy castle could be installed on a priceless carpet for a children's party!

After lunch, we strolled to the lake, to reflect on the fate of the young woman into whose childhood we had been granted a privileged insight. There is a small island in its centre. One of Diana's favourite playing cards showed a black swan, and four now guard it, swimming round in stately splendour. The trees and bushes formed a glorious green canopy, but it was still possible to glimpse the monument where she was finally laid to rest on September 6th, 1997. After a life very much in the public gaze, Diana is now safe in her beloved home. The summer house at the lakeside is dedicated to Diana and contains the conclusion of her brother's eulogy, in praise of "the unique, the complex, the extraordinary and irreplaceable Diana, whose beauty, both internal and external, shall never be extinguished from our minds." Rest in peace, Diana.

It was a very special trip. Even the rain held off for us and the heavy traffic did not daunt our spirits as we relived the day in our minds. Thanks to our new driver Mike, who navigated horrendously narrow gates with ease and to Chris, Brian and especially Jane for enabling us to visit this unique place. As Earl Spencer hoped, I am sure we will all take away a *feeling that Althorp is not just a historic house but also very much a home.*

Barbara Pearce

