

A Tale of Two Journeys!

Our September Trip to Wymondham

This was to be a full day: a train trip including a visit to the beautiful Wymondham Abbey and lunch. We set off in high spirits and had a fabulously clear run down the notoriously busy Norfolk roads to reach our destination in record time. Hold this thought.

The Mid Norfolk Preservation Trust does a sterling job in resurrecting old rolling stock and disused train stations. In 1847 the Dereham to Wymondham line first opened to passengers and continued until the services ceased in 1969, victim of the Beeching Axe. The line was completely closed in 1989, but six years later, The Mid-Norfolk Railway Preservation Trust was set up and services resumed in 1999, run by dedicated volunteers. Sadly our steam train driver was unavailable, but we were thoroughly entertained by our tour guide Phil, who pointed out local wildlife and landmarks as we trundled on at a stately speed, so welcome in these-fast paced times.

Wymondham Abbey was a study in beautiful stone. It has been a place of worship since 1107, when a Norman landowner named William d'Aubigny chose the spot to found a Benedictine monastery. The Tudor equivalent of Beeching, old Henry VIII closed the monastery in 1538, but, like the railway, the Abbey has been successfully resurrected and is very much at the centre of the community. We were given a free tour by knowledgeable guides, who pointed out its stunning features such as the baptismal font, which dates from 1440. The angel roof is amazing, with life-sized wooden angels seeming to hover over our heads. There is a magnificent gilded screen designed by Sir Ninian Comper, which was installed in 1920 as a memorial to the terrible losses of The Great War.

After a welcome cup of coffee, we returned to our trusty train and Dereham station, where a plentiful buffet awaited us, the highlight of which was the apple crumble-delicious! Everything had run like clockwork and we looked forward to a speedy return home. How wrong could you be!

The first hint of trouble was when we approached Holbeach, when Stewart's sat nav alerted him to traffic queues due to an accident. We diverted though the town and heavy traffic to rejoin the A17, to find another horrendous tailback at the Battlefield Lane junction. It was a nightmare scenario. On our side, a poor motor cyclist had been involved in an accident, but on the opposite approach road, more emergency vehicles were busy with a collision. We had fire engines and the Air Ambulance attending, and it took some time for the junction to be cleared so we could turn round and try the A151 route. But worse was to come.

We had only travelled a couple of miles when the dreaded blue lights appeared again in front of us. A Ford transit van and a bus had been involved in an incident and then the unfortunate police officer dealing with the scene had himself been struck by a car. Crime scene tape stretched across the road and home became a distant memory. By this time, many of us were thirsty as we had been travelling for almost 4 hours. Fortunately, the police allowed two of us through to get emergency supplies from a nearby garage. Then our guardian angel appeared in the unlikely guise of Matthew, the manager of the nearby McDonalds, who gave us a case of water and some food free of charge. He must have fluttered down from the Abbey roof. I often find people extremely kind in such situations.

At last we were allowed to move, but many roads were still blocked. Stewart was now out of hours, so we had to wait for a replacement driver and reached home at 8 45, a journey of 6 hours! I can honestly say that, in all my years of driving, I have never experienced anything like this. As I said before, fast-paced times, and too often impatience is a factor. Thank goodness for Stewart, our trusty if exhausted driver! Our thoughts go out to those families affected by yesterday's tragic events and hope that anyone in hospital has a speedy recovery.

It wasn't the ideal trip, but the return journey couldn't detract from the friendliness of the railway staff and the Abbey guides. Thanks also to our faithful organisers- there are some things you just can't plan for. Above all, let us say a fervent thank you to the emergency services who had the day from hell, yet who turned out selflessly to prevent further injury and help those in need. We got home late-but we did get home!

Barbara Pearce