

## Federation tour of Ireland 2013

Very early on a rather damp April morning, 35 former choristers, wives, and friends descended on Dublin from all over the UK. Some of us arrived in time for breakfast. This was the beginning of a tour of central Ireland, arranged by the Federation of Cathedral Old Choristers' Associations.

The tour started on the first afternoon with a gentle stroll down the main street of Dublin to Trinity College Library to see the Book of Kells, a beautifully illustrated 9<sup>th</sup> century gospel manuscript. My wife is a school librarian so we were particularly interested in the Long Room – an impressive wood-panelled library built in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, which had to have an upper gallery added to store extra books. Then down the road to not one, but two, Church of Ireland Cathedrals: Christ Church Cathedral and St. Patrick's Cathedral. Geoffrey's flowing white locks made an easy-to-follow tour guide's flag. We were guided by two former choristers of these magnificent buildings, and then went to tea with the Dean. By this time the rains had started to lash down, and the walk back to the hotel seemed so much further than the walk out. We were ready for our dinner at the Belvedere Hotel. Only one stayed up for the "diddly-diddly music" and dancing at the "Irish Night".

The next morning our co-ordinator Andrew chivvied us on to our coach for the short drive to Powerscourt Estate. Andrew did his best to keep us in order, but despaired of some acting like "Petulant Children". Time to appreciate the pleasant formal gardens and spectacular fountains, or simply wander in the sunshine. Some of the younger members had to prematurely age to qualify for Senior Citizens discounted entry. Then the rains returned as we descended to the ruins of Glendalough monastic settlement. Lunch was a quick bag of chips from the mobile café van. In the afternoon, the rain abated for our next destination at Russborough House. A formal tour round the house with its famous art collections (targeted twice by terrorists), was followed by the opportunity to wander round the cellars looking at the large exhibition of antique 3-D photographic equipment and pictures. In the evening we stayed at a slightly pretentious Hotel in Kilkenny, where one old chorister had to borrow a tie to adhere to the "formal" dress code for dinner. Ah yes, and Andrew stayed up all night to await some errant luggage that had failed to get on the coach from Dublin that morning.

Next morning, it was raining again. What do you expect? How else does the Emerald Isle remain so green? You may have heard of "Soft weather" - *Cloudy weather with soft mist or drizzle (typical Irish weather)*. A short wander round the town centre to buy lunch provisions, and my wife to browse the local bookshops (she is a librarian you know!), before we boarded the bus once more, this time to visit Jerpoint Abbey. Fortunately some of the Abbey has retained a roof, to keep the rain at bay. Then on to the Rock of Cashel, a village dominated by the Castle/Cathedral atop a steep hill. Fortunately there were a variety of warm establishments serving hot tea & coffee and cakes.

Like all good choristers, we all went to church on Sunday, to the Cathedral of St. Mary in Limerick. The organist Peter Barley (ex-Kings Organ Scholar) and the Dean (Sandra Pragnell) welcomed us to Choral Mattins. I felt a little sorry for him and his choir, knowing that a good proportion of the congregation was made up of former Cathedral Choristers. But they excelled themselves singing Stanford in B flat and "Now the green blade riseth". Limerick is a fine city with some good shops, a pleasant riverside to walk along, a medieval castle and the Hunt museum in the old Customs House. Interestingly, the fifteenth century O'Dea Mitre and Crozier, normally on view in the Museum on loan from the Roman Catholic diocese of Limerick, were being used that day to install the new RC Bishop just up the road. Limerick City played a distinctive part in the War of Irish Independence, almost 100 years ago, and there are several monuments and plaques around the city.

Monday morning and it wasn't raining; a good sign for our trip to the Cliffs of Moher, one of Ireland's top Visitor attractions and a designated UNESCO Geo Park. The Cliffs are 700ft high at the highest point and range for miles over the Atlantic Ocean on the western seaboard of County Clare. Then a drive across The Burren, a spectacular limestone pavement. As a lover of Geomorphology this was a highlight for me. For mere mortals, this is where much of Father Ted was filmed. Then on to Galway City, known as Ireland's Cultural Heart. Galway experiences a "year-round mild, moist, temperate and changeable climate". We experienced all of that in a single afternoon. After a pub lunch most of the group visited the RC Cathedral, a huge imposing limestone building, only consecrated in 1965. I particularly remember the stonework, the silver Milk-churn dispensing Holy Water, and the small shop selling a wide range of RC religious gifts. Then on to our hotel in Athlone, after a forced detour to avoid a low bridge!

Detailed local knowledge of suitable places to visit, plus an appreciation of the size of a modern coach are invaluable when planning a tour of Ireland. Our 2 coach drivers excelled in both, allowing us to make the most of our tour without getting stuck down little windy lanes. However, the coach's rear-wheel steering did help out on occasion! Today was our last full day and fortunately the sun shone, so we made the most of it by visiting Malahide Castle and Jameson Whiskey Distillery. Malahide Castle was lived in by the same family (Talbot) for almost 800 years and so the building has changed somewhat over the years. Our guide waxed lyrical about the "Turts", but it took a wee while to realize that these were in fact Turrets! Ah the Gaelic twang. Talking of language, we had a super guide at the Distillery, whose unusual Irish accent kept all of us guessing where she came from: Germany, via Australia, Dubai, Sweden and the USA plus all countries in between, apparently. Some of the group became official whiskey tasters, before Andrew chivvied us back on to the coach for the last time.

Overall a very enjoyable trip, with a fine group of former chorister et al, some of whom were special. On the last night we celebrated with a banquet back at the Belvedere Hotel. The menu looked a little suspect though, with Roast Lion and Black Forest Quateax. Or maybe words are spelt differently in Ireland. We spent the surplus cash on a few bottles of wine to help us sleep after all the excitement. The next day we all drifted back to the airport at various times, to catch flights back home to reality. The tour was not just cultural, ecclesiastical and educational, but we did our bit to help the beleaguered Irish economy. Wherever we went there was the omni-present Avoca gift-shop, full of \*nice" gifts; heavily patronised by some of the group, temporarily boosting profits in this time of Irish recession.

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