

Federation tour of East Anglia – September 2015

Every few years, the Federation of Cathedral Old Choristers' Associations arranges a coach tour for members, partners and friends, sometimes here in the UK and sometimes abroad. Although visits to wonderful churches and cathedrals make up a primary part, we always make sure that there are opportunities to appreciate and sing music, drink various quantities of whiskey, wine, tea and coffee, visit non-ecclesiastic venues, and "have fun". This year, the venue was a tour of East Anglia beginning and ending in the wonderful city of Cambridge.



So it was that a few intrepid Yorkshire folk met up on the side of a road very early in the morning. One of our members, Andrew, is a professional coach driver based near York, so he offered to transport us northerners down the A1 to meet up with the others. Cambridge is a wonderful old city, not designed to cope with lots of cars and large coaches, so our first task was to actually get into the hotel car-park and then turn the coach round without damaging other cars, the hotel fabric and a variety of immovable objects. Our driver took it all in his stride, and only later admitted that he had not driven the coach before and was more than a tad worried by the lack of turning space! But never mind, off we set with 30 odd old choristers (some more odd than others) into the flatlands of East Anglia. Our first port of call was Ely, a small city sitting only slightly higher than the surrounding former wetlands, most famous for its cathedral "The Ship of the Fens" visible for miles, with its crowning glory – the Octagon lantern tower. Upon arrival, some went straight to the nearest teashop, others listened to a guided tour of the Cathedral, and some went to the pub for lunch. The triforium houses the Museum of Stained Glass, a wonderful collection of glass pieces from all over, with examples of the different type of colouring glass through the ages. It was great to get so close up to such artwork. One of our less able members was determined to climb the stairs unaided specifically to look at an example of stained glass made by that imaginative Irish genius and craftsman Harry Clarke, unhelpfully placed right at the far end of the museum. The Cathedral was advertising "A Celebration of Animals" service, subsequently featured on "Songs of Praise" - so reminiscent of an episode from "The Vicar of Dibley".

Next stop was a short drive to Bury St. Edmunds Cathedral for Evensong. One of our party managed to visit an excellent Model Railway shop (twice) and had a personal guided tour of the market town (thank you Gordon Hughes). The Cathedral was built on the site of a huge Abbey, now only seen in the gardens and as the basis for some charming 17th century houses built in to the ruins. The magnificent modern tower of the Cathedral was only completed in 2005, but could pass for one built several hundred years ago. Good food and a drink in the bar rounded off a long day.



Next morning we set off to appreciate some astonishing Georgian Italianate architecture at Ickworth House. A private tour before the house was opened to the general public showed just how special we are. The main house is in the shape of a Rotunda, reminiscent of the Royal Albert Hall, but rather smaller. The East Wing houses a rather nice restaurant that I can personally recommend, and the West wing has been converted into a Hotel. Some of us were tempted to play croquet on the lawn (all the necessary implements were laid out for us), but there was a call to visit an English vineyard. How could we resist? Shawsgate Vineyard in Framlingham is one of East Anglia's oldest commercial vineyards producing white, red, rosé and sparkling wines. After a very informative trundle round the vines themselves and the bottling & storage room, we came to the most important task, tasting. Everyone has their preference and some say that only a rich red is acceptable, but for me it was the Sparking Rosé. The luggage compartment of the coach was duly filled with several boxes of wine and we sped back to the hotel, with a spring in our step, or at least a smile on the face. All except Andrew the driver who had to abstain!

Saturday morning arrived and the sun was still shining. The weather was so much better than expected. Today was to be another packed day with something for everyone, church, history and another "booze" exploration. Long Melford is a charming village well named. The High Street is (err) very long. At one end is the charming "Wool Church", Holy Trinity, built on the wealth of the local wool merchants, with a very long nave. This morning it was a popular meeting point, with a cycle race checkpoint, a bell-ringing challenge,

and a coachload of old-choristers. The church warden greeting us had an ex-chorister son-in-law. He was a contemporary of mine at Durham Cathedral who I remember well, both at the time and at subsequent reunions – it's a small world. The Internet will tell you lots about the church, but a highlight for me was the Lady Chapel at the East end. It is unusual to have a Lady Chapel in a parish church, especially such a large chapel, with a central sanctuary surrounded by a pillared ambulatory. The chapel was once used as a school (for a small number of children!) and there is even a multiplication table on the east wall. A serene and charming place, especially if you manage to be alone there. But lunch was calling, so off we trundled to Lavenham. Another quaint Suffolk village, renowned for its GuildHall. Much more important was that there were several Tea shops, pubs and craft shops. I chose the pub for lunch and very nice it was too. The afternoon venue was much anticipated by some of our number – The St. George's Whisky Distillery in



Roudham. Our hosts here gave us a private tour of the whole process, all contained on a surprisingly small site, and rounded off by a tasting. Once again several bottles were purchased at the ubiquitous shop, but it is definitely not a cheap option with some bottles commanding a very high price tag. Once again there was a happy atmosphere on our journey to Norwich.

Sunday morning, and it must be time for church; but as we are former choristers, it has to be Cathedral time, and such a fine example as Norwich has. Finding the Cathedral with its tall spire is not difficult, but negotiating the one-way road system in a large coach can be challenging. Andrew says he always knew where we were and where we were going, even if he was less sure about how to get there, but we managed to get to the Sung Eucharist on time. During a cup of coffee after the service, we even managed to speak to a former cathedral chorister (outside Norwich) and helped him get back in touch. One of the most pleasant aspects of a Federation tour is the excellent service we get from the local staff. After the service we were given a guided tour of the Cathedral by one of their top guides. In the afternoon we took a short drive to Blickling Hall, another National Trust property with a very nice restaurant for lunch and a tea-shop. (Sorry) a fine house owned by the family of Anne Boleyn. To some of us, the most memorable aspects of this afternoon were the replica sports cars parked at the front, and the museum dedicated to nearby the former WW2 bomber base at RAF Oulton – both educational and moving. Sunday evening gave us the opportunity to sing Compline in Norwich Cathedral. Geoffrey had knocked us into shape the previous night, but the lack of rehearsal did not restrain us, and the Old Choristers did Norwich proud. What a super way to end the day. We enjoyed Norwich so much our Federation festival is to be held there in 2017.



Monday morning arrived damp and dreary, but it turned out to be the best day of the holiday. You can't go to Norfolk and not sail on the famous Broads, so off we went to Wroxham. The small village where many pleasure boats depart is dominated by one chain – "Roys of Wroxham" – with a food hall, petrol station, department store, chemist, car park and even a McDonalds fast food outlet! Then on to our luxury yacht (OK maybe not). The next 90 minutes was pure relaxation, sailing on the rivers and backwaters, looking at the luxury houses, old sailing boats, and wildlife. Even the rain

failed to dampen our gentle sail – lovely. Off the water saw us back on the coach for the drive to The Thursford collection of Traction Engines, Mechanical Musical Organs and a full-blown fairground Carousel or two! Having listened to a short but highly entertaining concert on The Mighty Wurlitzer, most of us took our turns on the dancing horses and gondolas of the fairground rides. Not your typical two minutes ride, but each ride was more like seven or eight minutes. Many of us instantly reverted to childhood and revelled in the sheer joy. Others photographed the wild antics to act as future blackmail material. So



much more than we expected – a really, really, good day. In the evening we arrived at The Shrine Guest House at Walsingham: an Anglican shrine, but very, very high church with crucifixes and mini-shines everywhere, priests in Anglo-Catholic dress (lots of red flashes, button sashes!), and a real feeling of peace and tranquillity. The food was wholesome and filling, but the accommodation was best described as "Spartan" – one step up from a monk's cell – but we were only there for one night (fortunately). Another

opportunity to sing Compline, this time in the Shrine chapel. Again a lovely service, attended by many pilgrims and church parties staying with us.



The last day of the tour saw us start in Royal style, even though a “sea fret” (coastal fog) meant that the planned seaside drive was cancelled due to the poor visibility. We were off to Sandringham. We arrived early so it was delightfully quiet and tranquil in the gardens. Prior advice sent us to the museum at the far side of the estate, but it was well worth the walk. A wonderful collection of Royal vehicles (cars, fire engines, children’s pedal cars), history of the house, and artefacts. The house itself was very crowded, with only a few rooms open to the public and a fixed route through, but the church outside was lovely and very ornate. On came the rain, and so off we set back to Cambridge. Cambridge is a lovely old city, but is not designed for modern traffic, so we had to walk quite a way from the coach-drop to our first college, St. John’s. This would be delightful on a sunny day, but not so nice on a wet Tuesday when we are all tired. Fortunately, we were met at St John’s College by the Chapel Clerk (or Verger). Steven gave a very humorous tour of the College, helped by the fact that he comes from a long family line of vergers. He started by explaining that his stick is called a “verge” and used to clear people out of the way for the ecclesiastical procession in days of old. The verge’s silver head is detachable so that the stick itself can be used, even today, to clear a path or strike errant students if required. There is clearly a certain amount of friendly rivalry between John’s and King’s, so we felt duty bound to walk down the road to King’s College Cambridge. Most of us are familiar with King’s College Cambridge, that magnificent chapel on the banks of the river Cam, famous for Christmas services and large windows. But how many of us have been inside the building, had an impromptu personal demonstration of the organ by Stephen Cleobury (Director of Music), a very informative tour of the chapel by his wife Emma, and allowed up to the organ loft? Even the most infirm climbed the steep stairs to the organ loft. We left King’s on a high note, as we trudged through the rain back to the hotel to end the tour



This is probably the last Federation tour for a while as many members are getting older and more frail, with rather more sticks and walking aids than on the last tour. Hopefully we can drum up support from some of our younger members for a future event to resurrect this super time of friendship, music and culture, not forgetting keeping the local tea-shops in business.

