

Countesthorpe U3A - The Second page

Welcome to the first edition of our new feature "The Second Page", an occasional additional section where we will publish articles from our various groups (or individual members).

KENT HOLIDAY - JUNE 2025

An account from one of our members...

"Fancy a holiday based in Rochester?" I asked my beloved.

"We've been there" he replied "did Dickens, castle, cathedral...."

"Audley End? I'd like to see that" said I.

"What again?" he queried.

"Well, we had the kids in tow, so spent more time outdoors than in Canterbury?"

"Done that!"

"Yes, over 55 years ago, worth seeing again!"

"Don't think it will have changed much!"

Then inspiration struck - "Chatham Dockyard, ships, submarine, lifeboats....."

"Hmm"

"...and ...(my ace card) a ropery!", I had him hooked!

So, on June 19th, thirty-six of us set off, with temperatures set to beat the Caribbean for the next five days. I can see why Jill had not bothered to book a trip to the Isle of Barbados. Luckily our lovely Mercedes coach (driven by the equally lovely Geoff) was air conditioned, as was our hotel.

But first our visit, in time for lunch, to Audley End, which had been conveniently built between the M1 and the B184. It's a huge Jacobean 'prodigy' house, even if two-thirds of it was demolished during the first half of the eighteenth century - took long enough to walk round what was left! Not busy that day, so we all dispersed to explore. Before Countesthorpe u3a, James I and his queen had visited Audley End, (a few centuries earlier, obviously) and in preparation, the separate King's and Queen's entrances and separate, lavish suites of rooms, were built. On hearing their host, Thomas Howard, conveniently placed as the Lord Treasurer, boast of how much this had all cost, James became suspicious. Thomas ended up in the Tower! Later Charles I bought Audley End as a base for visiting Newmarket races. There is still a Jacobean feel to the state rooms with wonderful decorative plastered ceilings throughout. My husband spent a good 20 minutes with the guide spotting various images in the library ceiling while I lounged about on the furniture (well, it was hot!). We admired the obligatory state bed built in 1794 for George III, who didn't turn up, and the huge picture collection throughout the state rooms. but best of all, in a corridor, was a small closed cabinet which was opened to reveal nearly two dozen miniatures, (behind glass) including a superb portrait of Louis XV surrounded in diamonds. I love a little something in diamonds, unfortunately it was guarded by a guide, as was the nearby beautiful ormolu clock, he half jokingly (I hope) mentioned something about checking my pockets on the way out! On the top floor, probably to keep children out of sight and earshot, was a nursery, it was interesting and spacious but by far the hottest part of the house. Others had braved the outside sunshine and had managed to explore the gardens and stables before the journey to our hotel.

Friday, and Knole House. Another Jacobean 'prodigy' grand pile. Too hot to spend long exploring the 1,000 acre deer park, and the house offered a lot to see – a renowned collection of art and furniture, especially state furniture of the 1600s, 'acquired' from royal palaces by Knole's owner Charles Sackville, who was nicely placed as Lord Chancellor to William III. So, lots of silverware (behind glass!) and absolutely loads of portraits (saves on wallpaper) of sombre cavaliers and by contrast, the beauties of the court of Charles II. There again was the obligatory state bed, made for the marriage of the future James II, ('acquired' by guess who), but I preferred the Spangled Bed from around 1700, with its silk hangings adorned with silver 'spangles' or sequins, must have brought sparkle to any marriage! And not forgetting the original Knole sofa, c. 1635-40 - probably worth many thousands, cheapest I've found, if you're interested, is a second hand one on e-bay for £450. Not to be missed was the visit to the huge medieval barn, home to the renowned conservation studio, as seen in the BBC2's 'Hidden Treasures of the National Trust', and handily opposite the cafe for tea and cream scones! Quick visit to the Orangery, with a Peter Rabbit exhibition (Angie and I had already had photos taken as Mrs Tiggy-Winkle and Mr Tod, but we won't share them, so don't ask!) then past the Gatehouse Tower (not sure if anyone had actually ventured up all the steps inside), before our return to the coach.

The next day - Canterbury.

Stroll through the city via M&S (air-conditioned cafe for coffee) and onto the oldest Cathedral in the UK. Four of us toured together, helping Joyce with her temporary rollator and all the steps and different levels. First stop was to accommodate Christine's wish to see the site of Thomas Becket's demise. I opened the map near the wall plaque commemorating the event, but we all looked for ages but could see nothing else, we went through the tunnel under the Quire steps to find a guide and were directed back to where I'd opened the map, and yes, I'd been standing on the one word 'Becket' chiselled into a small flagstone marking the alleged spot! Won't put in print what the others said! Anyway, thanks to the rollator (or we might not have chosen this route) we headed to a lift via the cloister, we found the water tower with lift nearby, which took us to the Cathedral's silverware (behind glass - nobody is very trusting!) and the upper water tower with projections from medieval manuscripts beamed onto the floor, including pictures of monks sitting on the toilet (!) then through a wheelchair friendly, iron bound and studded, ancient automatic door into the upper level and the Quire and Trinity Chapel. Stunning space, wonderful soaring gothic architecture and colourful stained glass windows complemented by a 16 metre long hand woven textile 'Moon Landing' hanging in the Quire, which also housed many ornate and finely carved tombs, although Christine thought the painted decoration to the side of one looked like Laura Ashley wallpaper, and she wasn't wrong! Back down to the crypt, enormous space and so cool! 32 degrees outside! Meanwhile, others were exploring Canterbury, a couple of museums to visit perhaps, some strolled to the river and Hilary for one enjoyed a river cruise. I'm sure some retail therapy went on, after all, Fenwicks (nicely situated by the coach stop) had a sale on, so time there before the coach ride back to our base at Rochester.

Sunday and highlight of the week for Mike - Chatham Historic Dockyard.

Brilliant day, lots to choose from, including two large on site cafes, Our first stop was the Ropery, joined by Honor and thus there were three of us, the number required to make some rope, so we did, ten more visits and I'll have enough for a rather thick washing line! In the commercial rope works, Mike walked the quarter of a mile there and the same back alongside the rope making machinery's track, the staff use bikes! Like others, we visited the two historic warships and looked at HM Submarine Ocelot, I didn't fancy the confined space or the perpendicular steps - some brave agile (and skinny) souls did! Must be mad! Nearby was the architectural marvel of 3 slip, built 1838, the largest covered slip in Europe and, housed in an adjacent slip is the RNLI historic lifeboat collection, which I didn't explore fully but Mike and Malcolm did and were well impressed! Lots of galleries to explore, including the dockyards story, the building and history of HMS Victory and the evolution of shipbuilding. The Commissioner's House gardens were visited by some but no-one mentioned whether they'd managed to book the 'Call the Midwife Location Tour'. So much to see, another memorable day.

Monday and homeward bound, but not before a visit to St. Albans on the way. We were conveniently dropped in the city centre right opposite M&S, another air conditioned coffee venue, Geoff did take care of us! I ought to point out in fairness, that there are other coffee venues. Speaking of which, we visited the small but perfectly formed museum, finding half our fellow travellers there, along with Jill, who was drinking coffee in the witness box or was it where the jury sat, or even the dock? Either way the long arm of the law had finally caught up with her, but too late, as the courtroom was now part of the museum's cafe! We found a lot more of our party in the cathedral later, some having lunch. Meanwhile, I think a few made it to Verulamium Park, the museum of everyday life in Roman Britain, We are a cultured lot, but you can't beat such venues for lunches, coffee stops and loos! We completed our journey with no hold ups and the sun was still shining, can't remember when we ever had a UK break with no rain, didn't even need a jacket or cardigan. To match that, maybe Jill and her team might, for next time, consider Barbados?????

A few weeks later "Fancy a holiday with the u3a to the Isle of Wight?" said my beloved.

"We've been there, with Jill and the u3a before" I replied "Bembridge, Osborne House....."

"Some time ago and worth seeing again....."

I feel we've had this conversation before! "....."

and it's on my birthday and this can be my present, end of conversation" he finished and went back to his reading.

Not the Isle of Barbados then! And undoubtedly far more enjoyable - so note to Jill... Thank you in advance.

If you have anything you would like to publish in The Second Page
please send it to by email to info.cu3a@gmail.com