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NEWSLETTER **November 2024**



Leicester Cathedral & Richard III Visitor Centre **May 2024**

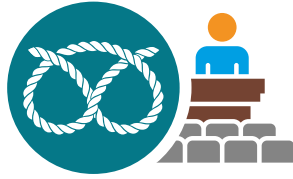
(See page 42 for details)

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New Members

We welcome the following new members:

Mrs J Atkinson (Uttoxeter)

Ms S Cope (Stafford)

Mrs M Crossland (Stafford)

Revd C Dakin (Gnosall)

Mrs C Evans (Ranton)

Ms J Fletcher (Stafford)

Mr E Holmes (Stone)

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Mrs E Slater (Great Wyrley)

Mr & Mrs J Squire (Stafford)

Mr & Mrs F Startin (Stafford)

Mrs S Watwood (Stafford)

General Enquiries: info.ntstafford@gmail.com

Editorial

Believe it or not, Christmas is only a few weeks away, and if you'd like to join us for our traditional stroll around Castle Ring, followed by Christmas lunch at The Rag, then please see page 8 for details.

It's also membership renewal time, and if you can, we'd like you to renew online. Please see John's item below, for details on how to do this... It really is much easier than filling in paper forms!

A warm welcome to our 20 new members. As a member, you get a 50 pence discount on our walks and talks, plus a copy of this newsletter twice a year, which I hope you'll agree, is good value!

In the 'Reflections' section (page 10), you can read about this year's Lakeland holiday which everyone seemed to enjoy. We're off to Yorkshire next year and if you would like to join us, please see page 3 for details.

Thank-you to everyone that's contributed to this issue (see back cover). Your input is very much appreciated.

Newsletter Editor

Nigel Holmes:

News

Membership Renewal Time

The time to renew your membership is fast approaching. This year we are trying a new approach and want as many members as possible to renew their membership online via the website. It should be easier for both members and for the administration of the renewal process. Just go to: ntstafford.org.uk/join-us and click on the Membership Renewal button, to open the membership renewal form.

Simply fill in the name(s) of the people renewing, your current email address and tick any of the category checkboxes that are applicable

The screenshot shows a teal-colored form titled "Membership Renewal". It is divided into two main sections: "Your Details" and "* Required". Under "Your Details", there are input fields for "First Name*", "Last Name*", and "Email@example.com*". Under "* Required", there is a dropdown menu for "Renewals(1-2)*". Below this, a heading reads "Please select any of the following that are applicable*", followed by four checkboxes: "National Trust member", "National Trust volunteer", "Member of staff", and "None of these". Another heading asks "Have any of your contact details changed in the last 12 months?", with "Yes" and "No" checkboxes. A blue "Next" button is located at the bottom right of the form.

If none of your contact details have changed in the last 12 months click the No checkbox and proceed to the next page. If some contact details have changed, click Yes and a series of fields will be displayed for you to complete any that have changed. You can then proceed to the next page.

This page contains an optional survey that we are conducting about how members can help

us in organising events or running the Centre and what computer equipment people are using to access our site and communications. We hope that this will help us to make sure that we tailor our communications to better suit your needs. The final page simply allows you to select your preferred method of payment (bank transfer or cheque). Once you have submitted the form, you will receive an email confirming the details that you have submitted, giving details of how to pay your subscription.

Some of you will have received a paper form with this Newsletter. However, we believe that if you do have access to the internet, you will find it easier to use the online form – so give it a go and let us know how you get on. Any trouble with the form just ring 01785 247411 or 07940 596730. Subscriptions, of £8 per head, for 2025 are due on January 1st, but remember, if you are a new member who

joined after the 31st August 2024, your membership is valid until the end of 2025.

John Willis

Yorkshire Holiday

Our May holiday next year (Monday 19th to Friday 23rd), has been arranged through Regent Travel. The itinerary is as follows:

- Monday:** Travel to Yorkshire & visit Haddon Hall
- Tuesday:** Visit York, with a guided tour of the Minster
- Wednesday:** Visit Hepworth Wakefield Gallery & Nostell Priory
- Thursday:** Visit Studley Royal Park & Fountains Abbey
- Friday:** Visit Wentworth Woodhouse, then return to Stafford

For more details, go to: ntstafford.org.uk/events then select the coach icon (bottom of the page), to download the booking form.

Please Note: All communication and bookings should be directly with Regent Travel.

Shugborough Update

Hedge Laying

We will be coming into the hedge laying season at the end of this month (which runs from November to March), and Shugborough are planning to run training sessions in the new year (mid-Jan/early Feb).

The hedge laying training will be carried out on the hedge rows at Haywood Park Farm, using the funding kindly provided by the NT Staffordshire Centre. This will allow the Estate's Rangers and volunteers to lay hedges for years to come on the estate, and also at other sites on our portfolio.

Greg Williamson

Lead Ranger - Shugborough Estate & Staffordshire Countryside

Weather Station

Look out for an update on the progress on the acquisition of the weather station on our 'About Us' page: ntstafford.org.uk/about-us.

Report from a Mansion Volunteer

As a 'mansion volunteer', you realise just how quickly time passes. The 'Summer of Fun' for visitors (which my grandkids loved) has now been replaced with an autumn 'Folklore' themed search in the house (for fairies). Congratulations to the Visitors Experience, Visitors Reception, Parkland and Countryside teams for all their hard work over the summer.

The house, apartment and servant's quarters will close in November, before reopening for the Christmas display. The Mansion Team have been 'grime busting', and working their way through the farmhouse ready to open up for a Christmas 'look-in' display.

Currently volunteers, with specialist training in book conservation, are working in the library, thoroughly checking the books for bugs, and carefully cleaning them. Another NT expert is working on the Britska Carriage, ready for display in 2025.



Another NT expert is working on the Britska Carriage, ready for display in 2025.

The 'folklore' theme continues, with fairies hidden around the mansion and 'fairy wishing trees', where visitors can leave their heartfelt wishes.

The Zen Den and sensory stations in the Mansion's Servants Quarters help visitors of all ages.

And, the excellent visual aids proudly in use in the Room of Imaginary Landscapes, continue to help people with sight difficulties, thanks to donations from the Staffordshire Centre.

In October, Kate Gibbon finished at Shugborough (after 9 years) to take up a new role at Charlecote. Kate has helped me personally and been central to the volunteering experience at Shugborough.



Caroline Beacall celebrated 20 years with the National Trust recently, having joined the Trust on a gardener trainee scheme in 2004. Since then, working with her team, she has followed her vision and transformed the gardens. And in 2019, Caroline became the first ever female Head Gardener at Shugborough.

The gardeners and ranger teams have been busy, planting 114,480 bulbs, and 16.5kg of wildflower seed.

The facilities team have recently completed a survey at Park Farm, and subsequently carried out maintenance work on the Mill wheel and Mill race. The wall at the back of the block had been leaking so repairs were carried out, which required 2 tonnes of sand!

As ever the Shugborough Estate goes from strength to strength, with ever increasing visitor numbers, which considering the weather, and the recent 'challenging' roadworks, is quite impressive!

Keith Alldritt

Upcoming Events

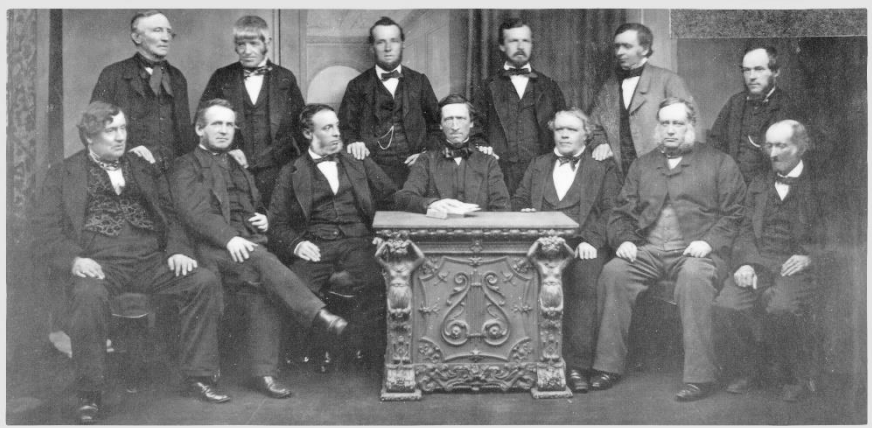
Talks

All talks are held on Tuesdays at Walton Village Hall, Green Gore Lane, Milford ST17 0LD, and start at 2.30pm.



History With Dividends

Ned Williams - 12th November



The Co-operative Movement traces its history back to the 1840s, and most towns all over Britain were eventually served by a local co-operative society. Societies set about retailing – to meet a huge variety of needs, and rewarded customers with a “Dividend” – a sum of money returned to the customer in proportion to how much he or she had spent.

But societies wanted to be more than just retailers, and this talk covers the variety of activities provided by Co-operative Societies.

Ned originally hailed from Essex, but moved to the Black country at the age of eighteen. His many interests include railways, cinemas and theatres, film-making, the fairground and the circus, Black Country history, shops and other buildings. As well as giving talks, he has written a number of books on all of these subjects.

Mervyn's Christmas Box

Mervyn Edwards - 10th December

As a man who first played Santa Claus at a department store at the age of 25 – he's had a hard life – Mervyn ought to know something about the magic of the festive season. Hear what it



is like to play Father Christmas, whilst wearing your Mum's blusher on your cheeks and Tippex on your eyebrows.

Come, all ye faithful, to a talk that looks at Christmas shopping, favourite toys, customs and a politically-correct Yuletide. Enter Mervyn's winter wonderland of ice-skating on Rudyard Lake, White Christmases, Geordie Santas and Father Christmas's nicotine break.

As Mervyn says, this talk is like a big, fat Christmas pudding: full of interesting ingredients and spice, and guaranteed to make you rush to the toilet. Put on your best Christmas jumper and your fake antlers, and join Mervyn for some tidings of comfort and joy.

Crafting with Digital Cutters

Edward Holmes - 14th January

Find out what exactly a digital cutter is, what they are capable of, and learn how they can be incorporated into your crafting projects... From making greetings



cards, to t-shirts, 3D papercrafts to Spirographs. In this talk, Edward will show you the different types of things that can be made using a digital cutter, with a live demonstration and, you'll be able to create a favour box (using a pre-cut and scored blank).

He'll discuss the pros and cons of using a digital cutter and, whilst some may consider it 'cheating', it's just a modern tool, that allows you to create things that wouldn't otherwise be possible. So come to this talk, and see if one of these machines could help to take your crafting to the next level!

Dates for Your Diary

Medical Detection Dogs

Aimee – 11th February

Annual General Meeting

All members welcome (free admission) – 8th April

For details of future talks, please see the website:

ntstafford.org.uk/events/talks

Walks

Walks (typically of 5 miles or less) are organised by centre members most months, when conditions are suitable. These gentle, morning walks, are a great opportunity to meet and chat with other members, then have lunch afterwards (or just join us for lunch, if you like?).



Christmas at The Rag

4th December – 3 miles

Our traditional Christmas stroll around Castle Ring, followed by Christmas lunch at the Rag, is an excellent way to meet up with fellow members. The optional walk has some steady climbs, but no stiles. It begins with an uphill stretch along a quiet lane, before turning off into a wooded area. We then connect with the "Heart of England Way", and follow this to Castle Ring, to see the far-reaching views over the Staffordshire countryside.

Please wear suitable footwear, as it will almost certainly be muddy. Timing is important. We have been asked by the restaurant, to be back by 12.00 to be seated, and ready to eat by 12.30.



Start: 10.30, at 'The Rag' car park

Sat Nav: WS12 0QD

Organiser: Dave Brass

Booking deadline: Tuesday 26th November

Book your place via the website: ntstafford.org.uk/book-the-rag

Future Walks

Here are a couple of proposed walks for the spring/summer

Month	Location
TBA	Swynnerton, Beech & Tittensor Chase (Lunch at The Fitzherbert Arms)
TBA	Pirehill & Aston-by-Stone (Lunch at the Star, Stone)

For details of future walks, please see the website:

ntstafford.org.uk/events/walks

We urgently need more walk leaders... So, if you would like to organise a circular walk in 2025 (6 miles maximum), with parking and a nearby location for lunch, then please get in touch.

Thanks.

Visits

Next Year

The committee are currently looking at options for one or two visits in 2025, but details are yet to be confirmed, so please see our monthly bulletins for further information.

To book on a visit, please see the website:

ntstafford.org.uk/events/visits

Note: All visits must be paid for in advance



Reflections

Lakeland Holiday

Here is a summary of this year's Stafford Centre holiday in Kendal. A more detailed account (with additional photographs) will be published as a document on the website in due course.



Sunday 19th May - Travel & Kendal town



On a warm and sunny Sunday, 39 happy travellers set forth to go north.

The coach, with "Best-ever" (as it turned out) driver Wayne, got us to our lunch stop early, so we could explore the amazing **Barton Grange Garden Centre** at our leisure.

Quite a place, with innovative ideas for self-service which didn't impact on quality, but meant very little queuing.

We arrived in Kendal at the County Hotel with time to explore the town before dinner. Sadly, all of the main attractions were closed, but that meant we found more of the quirky, interesting, historic parts.

We had a welcome drink in a 15th century Inn, opposite the ornate Town Hall. This is famous for its clock-striking bells on the hour, which play a different tune each day of the week.

The castle overlooking the river is the oldest building – built around 1200, and the newest is probably "The Box" – a futuristic performance space attached to the College. Kendal has such a variety.

Judy Brass

Monday 20th am – Motor Museum

Many of us have spent happy days exploring the wonders of the Lake District without wishing to visit a motor museum, so this small, beautifully presented gem was a surprise, because you didn't need to be a 'petrolhead' to enjoy it.

Tucked in the Leven Valley and using the site of the once famous Reckitt's Bag Blue works, this museum celebrates Britain's recent motoring past. This was not a museum of the exotic, the unattainable, the extreme, such as Ferrari, Lamborghini, Maserati or even a Porsche or two, but the humble Austin, the Ford Cortina, the Hillman; cars which we may have driven or were owned by fathers or friends.



True there were some 'super' motorbikes including the sort of Norton my one-time father-in-law would thrash around the Isle of Man TT course, but in the main, it was cars we all recognised, cars from the 50s, 60s and 70s. All were presented well, with good labelling and clear information and not a speck of dust to be seen.



Added to all of this, the Campbell Bluebird Exhibition lived in a separate shed. This exhibition pays tribute to the speed kings, Sir Malcolm Campbell and his son Donald, who between them captured 21 world, land and water speed records, thereby achieving legendary status as national heroes.

John Hibbs

Monday 20th pm - Haverthwaite & Bowness

Today might be called "Transport Day! ". After seeing all the amazing cars, we moved on to Haverthwaite Station, an attractive old-fashioned station, in the traditional colours.



Beautiful rhododendrons on the trackside, cases piled up ready for loading aboard, a Pedestrian bridge leading to a beautiful picnic spot, and lots of trainspotters!

The excitement increased, and all eyes turned towards the tunnel, as an engine came in sight. We have a reserved carriage, thanks to Phil and Margaret, and as soon as all are seated the whistle blows, the

flag is waved and we're off. How many of us remember pulling that leather strap to shut the window, as thick smoke engulfed the train while going through a tunnel - very much in the dark!

Beautiful countryside (bluebells, rhododendrons, gorse) as we travelled on - passing walkers, cyclists and spectators, until we reached Lake Windermere, ready for our next mode of transport.

A smooth transition from the train at the end of the line and onto the queue to board our boat to Bowness.

Although cooler on the boat (welcome on such a hot day), it was slightly breezy. Plenty of space for the several hundred on board, and it included a bar downstairs.

Windermere is about 10 miles long, and we travelled much of that distance from south to north. Such a selection of costly residences pointed out, and equally expensive boats.

It was good then to sit by the lake, wander or eat at Bowness.

Brought to life with a bump, as two jets flew very low several times over us. A great day.

Anne Glover

Tuesday 21st am - Wordsworth Museum & Dove Cottage

On arrival, our party was split up into 3 groups as Dove Cottage is very small. Most of us went into the new Wordsworth Museum exhibition area which detailed all of Wordsworth's life with artefacts, original letters and manuscripts.



On the museum roof, there was a lovely view of the area around. Once it was our turn to enter the cottage, we first went into the

stable area to watch a film, which put everything into context and gave us an introduction. Then with our guide, we entered all the small rooms where William and Dorothy had lived from 1799 - 1808.

As William had received money from two inheritances, he had no need to work, but they `lived plainly and thought deeply`. They both



loved walking the fells and were inspired to write from the nature they saw around them.

Wordsworth married Mary Hutchinson in 1802, and their three oldest children were born at Dove Cottage. Due to his family growing and all the visitors, Dove Cottage became

too small, and in 1808, they moved to Allan Bank in Grasmere.

After our visit inside the cottage, our group entered the garden surrounding the cottage and a gentleman dressed up in the costume of the day recited the poem 'I wandered lonely as a cloud', much to the delight of our party.

Janet Leek

Tuesday 21st pm - Hill Top Farm, Home of Beatrix Potter

We arrived in Hawkshead village thankfully in the sunshine.

The committee had organised a minibus to take us to Hill Top, as the road leading to the house was very narrow. After three short trips, we arrived safely.

Beatrix bought the farm in 1905 with the proceeds of her first book, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*.



The farmhouse is incredibly small, however walking through the rooms, we were well organised by the volunteers and there was plenty to learn, all about Beatrix's life.

Although Beatrix never lived at Hill Top full time, she wrote 13 of her 23 books there, and many of her famous scenes are set on the farm and garden.



As we walked around the garden it was in full bloom, with lots of colourful plants and shrubs. The wisteria and irises were beautiful.

Beatrix left the house, farm, nearby villages, and land to the National Trust upon her death in 1943.

Jane Plant

Wednesday 22nd am - Windermere Jetty Museum

It was raining – a suitable day to visit a lake with boats! Phil gave us all the risk assessment: slippery cobbles, possibility of being run over by our coach. Better still, was a welcoming group of yellow flag iris. And then, we entered the Windermere Jetty Museum – a breathtaking large modern building, which opened in 2019 at a cost of £21m.

The interior is spacious with a lofty ceiling, all clad in Douglas fir, it is an interesting shape allowing plenty of space for shopping opportunities and ticket sales. And Ken, who knew the answer to all questions.



We were welcomed by staff and taken to the activities room where coffee was waiting.

The museum room, without water, was filled from ceiling to floor and all wall surfaces covered with memorabilia of boats of all sizes connected with Windermere. These included life jackets, anchors, helms, rollocks, life buoys and much more.



Still raining we gathered under a veranda to hear Sid, a metals man, talk mostly about wood! How it has to be steamed to form the required shape and the different ways of building wooded boats. This is a working museum for conserving, and through the plate glass wall, we could see boats at many different stages of completion. Most boats worked on, are owned by the museum, but some private work is financially rewarding.

Sid told us about a private boat being restored and converted to run on batteries, and a coffin boat, built in the mid-1800s, and last used in 1972, is being restored for the Glen Coe Museum and will go to their new building in about five years' time.

A 1920s racing dinghy, when fully restored, will join the jetty fleet for hire. Raven the pirate's boat in Swallow and Amazons will be restored shortly and be used for children's visits. The whole of Sid's talk was fascinating, and his enthusiasm for the workshop was apparent. Still raining, we retired to the activities room for sandwiches and coffee kindly provided by the Jetty staff.

I then 'inspected' the restored wooden boats on the water – in a sort of 'water hangar'.

It was then time to leave, after a very fulfilling visit, and gather together for a group photograph.



Anna Munro

Wednesday 22nd pm - Blackwell House

On arrival here, we were given a talk and heard that the house was designed by English architect Mackay Hugh Baillie Scott (1865-1945), as a rural retreat for Manchester brewery owner Sir Edward Holt (1849-1928) and his family. When they vacated it, everything that could be moved was, and in 1941, it became a boarding school, then offices until 1976. In 1999, it was purchased with the help of the Heritage Lottery Fund and private donors, by the charity Lakeland Arts, which drew on the collections of galleries, institutions, private lenders, local makers and designers, to refurnish it. It was opened to the public in 2001 as a gallery showcasing the works of renowned Arts and Crafts designers and studios.

The highlight of the house for me was the White Drawing Room which, in contrast to the other rooms, was flooded with natural light and had floral stained-glass windows, window seating with views across the lake and a stunning blue-tiled fireplace.



I also enjoyed the exhibition, "Sublime Symmetry", which demonstrated the works of ceramic designer William de Morgan with many of his superb pots, tiles and vases.

Sue Gregory

Thursday 23rd am - Dunham Massey

We would normally have headed straight to the garden, but due to the rain, we went to the Hall instead. Walking from the Visitors Centre, we passed two conservation projects. The first was a 'Bank Management and Habitat', essential work had to be done to help keep the bank strong and performing its purpose of keeping the water from the house, whilst still encouraging a diversity of wildlife.

The second was the Ancient Oak Project, a 500-year-old oak tree (the oldest oak in Dunham Massey deer park) that predates the historic buildings.

Passing through the services areas, there were excellent displays in the scullery, prep areas and kitchen. From the kitchen, we entered the dining room. We were told this had been relocated so the food would be hotter.



In the Great Hall, scaffolding was erected, running the length of the windows. Over the last 100 years of exposure to the elements, the stone mullions needed considerable restoration.

The Chapel was also undergoing conservation work. In 2015, the fragile historic silk was painstakingly removed and stored. A replica has been woven, to replace it, by one of the few remaining silk weavers in England (a modern reproduction of 18th-century silk). In the library, there are over 3,500 books, which take conservators three winters to check for any bugs or deterioration.



In the Queen Anne Room, a magnificent bed made in 1680 for the Duchess of Somerset, was a treasured possession gifted to George Booth, 2nd Earl of Warrington.

Three conservators were checking the fabrics and furnishings for any bugs etc.

They explained how important checking the humidity was, that day it was 55 (within the guidelines of 40 to 65).

Unfortunately, time ran out on us, so we headed back to the coach, passing four deer, happily grazing by the exit gate, taking no notice of us.

Ann Newman

Thursday 23rd pm - Return Home

A quick note on our driver **Wayne**.

We were informed from the day of booking the holiday, that we would see a minimum of two drivers for our tour, as that is how Daish's coach policy works. Then, with two days to go, I was told we were to be allocated one driver for the whole trip.

Having spoken with Wayne on a couple of occasions before 'the day', it was clear he had studied our itinerary and made sensible comments to ensure our journey would be trouble free. And he began the holiday by being at the first pick-up thirty minutes before the scheduled time, just in case!

As was now the new 'normal', Wayne delivered us back to our drop-off points on schedule and was thanked by all our travellers, and given the title 'best driver ever' for a Stafford Centre holiday. He certainly won my vote for his skill at driving, his immense patience with the tour leader (as the occasional problem arose in the plan) and for being genuinely pleasant company for all of the trip.

As is customary, on the last leg of the trip 'feedback forms' were distributed as well as a promise to consider any recommendations for future trips. One exception is our ability to set up a Stafford branch of the 'Elvis'/ Henry fan club.

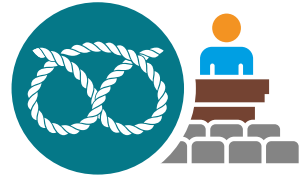
Thanks to all our travellers, who made this trip worthwhile and enjoyable.

Phil Grainger

Talks

The Fiddle

Natalie Cummings - May



Our talk began with a short film of the receipt of a battered old violin by John Dilworth of BBC's "The Repair Shop". It summarised the story of a precious fiddle being taken across countries at war, to safety and restoration and rededication.



Our speaker Natalie, is the grand-daughter of its original owner Abraham, who was violin teacher to Tsar Nicholas' 11 children. He and his family fled the Bolsheviks in 1917, leaving St Petersburg and going via Odessa to the UK.

He gained free passage by playing to the fee-paying passengers, and made a new life for himself in Leeds, where his daughter Rosa, also learned to play the violin. She was a superb violinist, inheriting the instrument on her father's death, and was invited to join the famous Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra.

Natalie's narrative was extremely moving, as she meticulously explained what harrowing and terrifying things were done to, and happened to Rosa...

Whilst in Germany, along with several other Jews in the orchestra, Rosa was arrested by the Nazis in 1938, on Kristellnacht (a night of Jewish massacres), and was sent to Mauthausen for three years. She was then moved to Auschwitz where, thanks to her musical talent, she was forced to join the Women's Orchestra, which saved her life.

Rosa spent the last five months of the war in Belsen, before testifying at the Nuremberg War Trials, exposing the horrors of the death camps.

Natalie was just nine years old, when she met Rosa, shortly before her death from TB in 1947. Rosa's brother Israel then made a living playing the violin in popular bands like Billy Cotton's, in the 60s and 70s.

Finally, the fiddle was passed on to Natalie, who as a pianist, fondly remembers playing duets with her father Israel. However, when he died in 1987, the fiddle was left unused and fell into disrepair.

In 2018, Natalie decided to try to have the fiddle restored, taking it to "The Repair Shop", who enlisted the expertise of renowned violin maker and restorer John Dilworth. He perfected remarkable repairs and restoration on the 1883 dated German-made instrument, bringing it back to beautiful tone and depth.

Natalie has since donated the violin to the Yehudi Menuhin School, where the third student to have it on loan, is a male student – half Russian. A memorable story coming full circle.

Natalie has put this remarkable, true, family history into a book "The Fiddle", which she summed up with these words – the family survived because of it; it went on a journey with them; suffered and rejoiced with them.

Judy Brass

Editor's note: This talk was originally billed as 'The Violin', however, as mentioned above, the 'The Fiddle', is the title of the book on which this talk is based. Although harrowing in places, 'The Fiddle', is well worth a reading (IMHO). There are also plans for the book to be made into a film, in the not-too-distant future.

Through the Eyes of a Magician

Peter Turner – June

This mesmerising talk, was delivered by an expert speaker, who earns a living from talking motivationally; doing demonstrations; experiments; illusions and psychological mind games.



I noted a comment from him – “The psychology behind magic is more mysterious than psychology itself”.

He began his working life as a graphic designer, but found that he could earn more money, and with less stress, by doing his hobby. However, he *has* used his artistic prowess, to write, design and publish a set of fascinating books which have many magical/optical illusions, that many of the audience were keen to buy, and be amazed.

Pete has been performing magic for 26 years and he showed, with the help of some willing volunteers, just how slick and quick of hand a magician without shirt sleeves has to be. He explained the build-up of his “patter”, as he told us what was about to happen, as he added to the tension, building the mystery. He demonstrated several of his simple tricks – all amazing. Using clever psychology, he demonstrated how to trick the mind to see something that’s not there.

By auto-suggestion, he convinced the volunteer holding a picture that only he could see, that it was a picture of a bride and groom. Before it was shown to the audience, Pete told us that it was actually a picture of a collie dog. That’s certainly what I saw!

Were we all wrong, or right? – Pete said that there was no Right or Wrong answer. More illusions and intrigue followed.

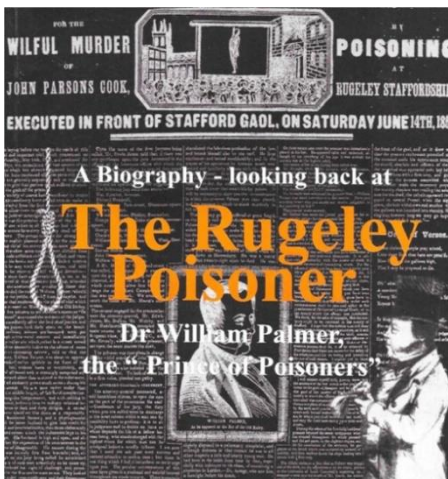
He apparently also spends time running workshops in schools and colleges (some for charitable causes), to help build confidence in youngsters, by using enjoyable modules and a sprinkling of magic... Quite a guy. Certainly, with a gift.

We surely would be thrilled to be entertained by another of his intriguing talks. Thanks so much to Margaret for arranging this one.

Judy Brass

The Rugeley Poisoner

Dave Lewis – July



Dave Lewis examined the evidence, rumours and the numerous scandals that surrounded a Staffordshire doctor who, in the Mid-Nineteenth Century, shocked the civilized world.

William Palmer became the first person to be brought to trial for murder using strychnine. This was in spite of the fact that no strychnine was found in the body

of his victim. Once he had been accused of murdering his friend and racing companion, John Parsons Cook, the gossips had a field day, accusing him of murdering up to fifteen others.

Amongst his alleged victims, were his wife, his drunken brother, his outrageous mother-in-law, four of his five children, and even some chickens! - to name but a few. A number of these individuals were insured by Palmer, who was in dire financial straits, and others he was said to have tried to insure, without success.

In November 1855 William Palmer went to the Shrewsbury Races with John Parsons Cook and a number of other friends. Palmer lost a lot of money, his horse lost but Cook's horse won.

That night they all celebrated Cook's success drinking champagne at the Raven Hotel. During the meal Cook was taken ill, complaining that he thought Palmer had 'dosed him'. In spite of this, Cook travelled back to Rugeley with Palmer and took a room at the Talbot Arms, opposite Palmer's house.

John Parsons Cook died in agony in the early hours of Wednesday 21st November 1855 in Room 10 at the Talbot Arms, Rugeley.

There followed a shambolic post-mortem, held in the Assembly Room at the Talbot Arms on 26th November 1855. Surprisingly, several townsfolk were allowed to attend and watch the "opening of the body". The autopsy was carried out by Charles Devonshire, a young, inexperienced medical student, and Charles Newton, an unqualified assistant to a Rugeley chemist, who was conducting his first ever post-mortem.

Before the autopsy, Palmer had given Newton a couple of brandies (to steady his nerves) and he was seen to push against Newton, who subsequently bumped into Devonshire and some of the contents of the stomach spilled into the body. A jar, with the samples in, went missing which Palmer instantly admitted to having moved.

Samples were sent to Professor Taylor for analysis, but were in a very poor state, and he immediately telegraphed to ask for a second post mortem to take fresh samples.

During the Coroner's inquest, it was established that Palmer got his friend, the postmaster, Samuel Cheshire, to open mail addressed to the coroner, and that he sent messages, with gifts, to the coroner.

The coroner's jury returned a verdict that, "We find that the deceased died of poison wilfully administered to him by William Palmer". This in itself was an incorrect procedure. The coroner's jury was only

supposed to be investigating the cause of death, and it would have been normal practice to adjourn any inquest, which might involve a charge of murder, until all criminal proceedings had been finished.

After the most memorable trial of the Nineteenth Century at the Old Bailey, Palmer's public hanging, in front of Stafford Gaol, attracted a crowd of over 30,000 people.

Two Acts of Parliament were made law because of the case, including the one known as the "Palmer Act" - which allowed the case to be tried at London's Old Bailey rather than in Staffordshire, where the crimes were committed.



Although only convicted of one murder, his effigy stood in the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's in London for 127 years, labelled as a serial poisoner. No less a writer than Charles Dickens, he was fascinated by the Palmer case, and wrote an article entitled "The Demeanour of Murderers" which was published on June 14th 1856, the day of Palmer's execution. In the article he named Palmer, "The greatest villain that ever stood in the Old Bailey".

Well, was he? That he was a rogue, heavily in debt, guilty of attempted bribery, fraud, forgery, overly fond of the ladies and of gambling on the horses, is beyond doubt!

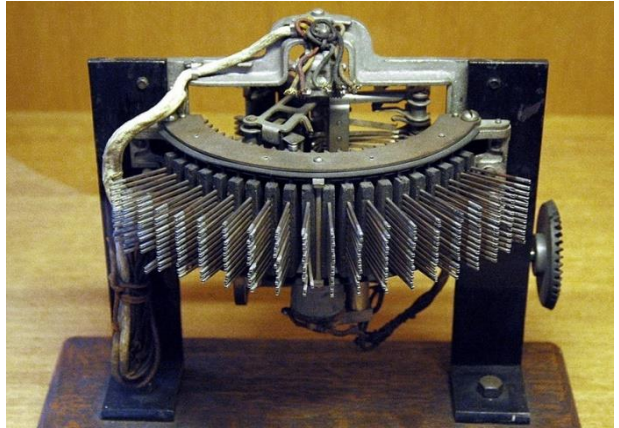
There were too many coincidences, and deliberate interference with the case he was actually tried for, for him to be innocent, but some of the fifteen sound like an early version of trial by social media.

John Willis

The History of Telecommunications in the UK

Nigel Holmes – August

Nigel began his talk, by saying that his whole career had been spent working in Telecommunications, starting as an apprentice in 1975. He had always been interested in how things worked, so this line of work appealed



to him. He retired in 2018, having seen many changes through the years as technology advanced.

He explained that 'communication' was defined as 'the imparting of information by speaking, writing or some other medium', and that the first type of 'telecommunication' was telegraphy (first used on the railways in the 1800s), which allowed messages to be conveyed over wires (using symbolic codes), more quickly than physically carrying them... eventually this became the 'Telex' service.

Next came Telephony. Alexander Graham Bell made the first voice communication in 1876 to Mr Watson, who was in the next room.

It soon became apparent that a 'telephone exchange' was needed to connect people. The first telephone exchange opened in 1876. Calls were connected mainly by women 'operators', who were employed in huge numbers, to meet the ever-increasing demand.

The first Automatic telephone exchange opened in 1879, based on a system designed by Almon B Strowger (a Kansas undertaker) and this technology was used in the UK for over 70 years

Nigel explained that electromechanical exchanges needed constant maintenance, so, that's why electronic and crossbar exchanges were introduced to replace them. The real step change however, came in the 1980s, when BT invested in digital exchanges (System X and AXE10). This was sometimes referred to in the business, as the transition from 'POTS' (Plain Old Telephony Systems) to 'PANS' (Pretty Amazing New Stuff).

Around this time, more and more people were using their phone line to access the internet, via their home computers. But the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) wasn't really designed for this purpose. By the 1990s BT had started to carry telephone calls over data circuits, and by the millennium, the data network became even more important, as demand for home broadband started to increase.

It's impossible to list everything that Nigel covered in this talk, but when you consider, that if you wanted to make a long-distance phone call in the 1960s, you would more than likely need to make it via the operator... Fast forward to the present, when most people rarely use their land-line (if they still have one).

In the last 70 years there have been huge advances in communication and information technology... From dial-up Internet access, to ultra-fast, fibre broadband. From analogue mobile phones to 5G, and from 5 TV channels (plus satellite/cable TV), to hundreds of channels, and on-demand streaming services.

Nigel finished his talk with a slide, showing how telecommunications started with telegraphy (an early form of digital communication), then analogue telephony, which was superseded by digital telephony. Then, from data over digital voice circuits, to IP networks, and finally voice over IP networks (another form of digital communication)

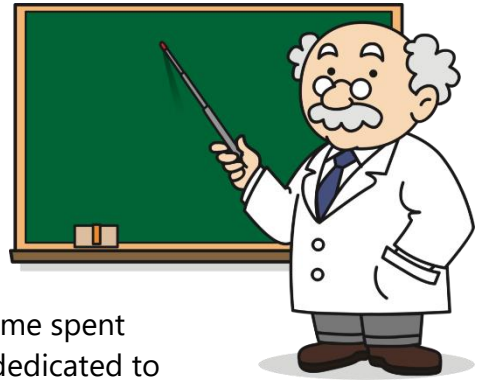


Janet Leek

Tales from the Classroom

John Hibbs – August

Those who know John as a member of our walking group (or after-walk lunch dates), already know him as an irrepressible raconteur, and he was given the floor in our September talk, to tell us about education, both his own and the time spent educating others. Plus, the years dedicated to improving the teaching in Staffordshire as an HMI.



John chose to wear a T-shirt bought for him by his daughter, in spite of being advised by his wife, not to go on about being dyslexic.

DISLEXIC SCRABELL CHAMPIAN

In 1948, his foray into education began badly, as he had undiagnosed dyslexia and he was regarded as a 'slow learner', who eventually failed his 11+.

Through good teaching in an excellent secondary modern school, he managed to gain 7 good 'O' levels, which won him a place in a boys' grammar school to do 'A' levels. Then he proceeded to Goldsmiths College.

From there, he got his first teaching job, at Forest Hill Comprehensive in London, as a maths teacher. It was clear from how John spoke about this appointment, that he enjoyed it, and discovered the foundations on which to base the rest of his career in education.

He charted his rise, moving to a further three schools, first to deputy, then Head of Maths at The Manor School in 1978.

Following eight years at Ladbroke Maths Centre (a teachers' centre in Northwest London), he was invited to become one of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools in Staffordshire, a post which he felt privileged to hold.

We were told that he had a year's training to undertake this job, and that one of his many assignments around Stafford, was to inspect Shugborough's Education Programme. John said that he had five good years doing inspections, before Ofsted was brought in, when he went from doing the job of training others, to do the job and then Q A them doing it.

Fortunately, he spent the last three years as an HMI inspecting teacher training, which he enjoyed and which lead onto a part-time post with the Open University, training potential maths teachers.

We were treated to numerous anecdotes, plus looking back to important moments...

When a sixth former said: "Oh not you again, you make my brain hurt!". John felt that was the best compliment a teacher could be given.

When, after hiding one arm up his sweater and saying, "I am a Martian and I can only count in fives" and proceeding to take the lesson one handed, he felt it had got his thrust across convincingly, only to be approached after the lesson concluded, by one hesitant youngster – "Sir, are you really a Martian?"

Point taken, never forget how important and convincing a teacher can be... When it was pointed out by a wise and trusted colleague at one of his comprehensive schools – "Remember, before us, we have the Bishops and the Murderers."

A thought-provoking talk, which has relevance and resonance to education still. Thank-you John, for sharing your Life in Education.

Judy Brass

Our Fifties House

Joanne Massey – October

Joanne is a favourite for our audience, but husband Kevin has normally not featured greatly. However, he certainly quickly gained admiration for his DIY skills, so clearly evident in



the photographs which illustrated the talk. Although not to everyone's ideal in life, to live surrounded by furniture and styles from the past, we were entranced by the couple's enthusiasm and dedication to the task.

As a little girl, Joanne said that she loved old things and the old movies. When she and Kevin met, they were both involved with the 1950's scene. They loved the colour and vibrancy, the music and the style of that era. When they married in 1995, they bought a house which they set about 'de-modernising'. Old magazines – *Ideal Homes* were the inspiration – usually showing a man in a shirt and tie – always a tie, making and changing furniture. Pictures showed interiors with Formica, Ultra TVs; Marley tiles; candlewick bedspreads and all the things we/I can remember from our childhoods.

The second house they moved into, was built in 1948, so was ideal for honing their skills and collecting more items in the appropriate 50's style. This was used for TV programmes but Joanne was never completely happy with the filming.

So, by the time they moved into their present house, they both knew exactly what they wanted and needed. It took six long years of effort

and dedication, whilst working at their own jobs, but the results, as we saw, are amazing. Lots of bright colours, patterned textiles and perfect 50's furniture, much of it built by Kevin.

The kitchen has an Aga and their original fridge from the era, which still works. We were treated to seeing all the details of china, glass wear, place mats, carpets, cutlery, Bakelite switches; lava lamp; Lincrusta wallpapers – all meticulously sourced to give the truly authentic look of the time. Their bedroom is a “boudoir” extraordinaire – and we learned of its sourcing from a Brighton hotel! Joanne’s dream come true.

Part of the house is a lodge which was built in 1830, a Listed Building so permission was required for much of the extensive changes Joanne & Kevin wanted. This is decorated in the Arts & Crafts style, which they felt was more in keeping with the high 14ft ceilings and tall, leaded windows. Bookcases adorn the one wall which can be accessed by a sliding library ladder – a ‘must’ in any decent library.

The garden has been lovingly created from a wilderness, into a beautiful space full of flowers and colour – a place of which to be proud.



Anything too modern which is required for life, like a computer, is hidden away or disguised, so sitting down in their home that they love, is truly 50's style

through and through.

Such an enthusiastic speaker, we all warmed to learn of 50's Life – Joanne and Kevin style.

Judy Brass

Walks

Bluebells at Hem Heath

May



Thirteen walkers on a lovely dry and sunny spring morning, set out at a gentle pace.

After a very short walk along the road, we entered the Staffordshire Wildlife Trust nature reserve - Hem Heath. Although often referred to as Hem Heath, this woodland encompasses four distinct woods - The Oaks; Newstead Wood; Newpark Plantation and Hem Heath.

It is the largest area of woodland in Stoke-on-Trent! Despite its name, there is actually no heathland within the reserve – although it is reasonable to assume that some of the land would have been open heath at some point in its history. The reserve is a mix of different woodland types, which have evolved through different periods, the oldest being some 400 years. Sadly, 'Ash Dieback' is affecting the woods, and there has been a programme of felling, which will continue over the next few years.



We took a zigzag route through the woods to see the best of the brilliant bluebell display. It looked lovely in the dappled shade on our sunny day. Many photographs were taken, and a coffee stop allowed a group picture. The surprise was that there were so few other people. We almost had the woods to ourselves.

We emerged from the wood near the Wedgwood factory, and followed the path round to the road. There were no stiles on the walk, the only barrier was a level crossing. Here we waited some time for several trains going by, before being allowed to continue.



Shortly after the crossing we joined the tow path on the Trent and Mersey Canal. An appropriate place because one of the main driving forces behind building this canal was Josiah Wedgwood. This was so that he could get his raw materials in, and get his pots out, without them being broken on the poor Staffordshire roads (no change there then!). James Brindley, then a little-known mill engineer, was engaged to survey a canal from the Mersey to the Trent, even before the Duke of Bridgewater embarked upon his pioneering canal.

A later version of this scheme, then known as the Grand Trunk Canal, was approved by Parliament in 1766, on the same day as the canal joining it to the Severn. Brindley was the engineer of both canals.

A flat and smooth tow path took us past lock 35, and to prove it is Spring, past some swans with six cygnets, and back to the pub for a well-earned lunch after a lovely walk. Thank-you Janet, Robert and Pam.



Dave Brass

Barlaston & Downs Bank

June

A giant spider, a 'zebra', a real fox, wild orchids and Downs Banks green and pleasant land... all things seen on the 4.5 mile walk that Nigel Holmes had organised, starting and ending at the Plume of Feathers in Barlaston, with some very nice food at the end of the walk prepared by Head chef Bruce MacKie.



Nine of us set off, with Nigel at the front, and his son bringing up the rear. We crossed the canal and railway (site of the former Barlaston station), then up past the old, now defunct, Wedgewood Memorial Colleges, that previously offered short courses in literature, languages and history (a sad site, to see them now boarded up).

As we crossed the road, toward the Upper House, we walked alongside a gigantic wooden carving of a spider. A few of us shuddered as we walked along, and expansive views began to appear on both sides of the path.

The Upper House (Now a hotel and wedding venue), was formerly owned by Josiah Wedgwood's grandson and his wife (94 acres bordering the canal and parish boundaries). The family wanted to escape the pollution of the potteries. Downs Banks, what a treat. Beautiful trees, and a glaciated valley stretching down to the left. It's an area of approximately 166 acres, with a stream running from North to South, woodland and heathland wildlife habitats, and grazing land (since 2005), to encourage bilberry gorse and broom.

On the east side of the stream, on high ground, there's the Millennium Viewpoint, with a toposcope (the brass plate was stolen in 2015, but replaced in 2017). Apparently, the whole area was purchased by John Joule & Sons, in 1950 and presented to the National Trust as a memorial to those who died in the first world war.

A steady decline down a path with volunteer made steps - one a double depth, where I had to kneel to get down it, eventually reaching the stream at the bottom. Very peaceful.



A slight left turn and over the ford and facing a purpose-built cafe (Coffee and Cones). It was closed, but the owner kindly allowed us to take a coffee break there. Then back over a stile and down the road, past a tiny house, with a large fox in the side garden (that managed slink away, just as I took out my camera!).

There was much chatter in the group throughout the walk (now talking about knees, and the benefits of using walking poles) as we walked up the slight incline, back to the canal bridge. Soon after joining the towpath to walk back, we spotted two canoeists on the water in very 'disobedient' inflatable canoes. We soon overtook them and rested on the canal bridge 100 (Turnover Bridge) for yet another group photograph.

As we dropped down from the bridge, we saw a row of wild dark pink orchids and looking across the canal a house, with its own boat mooring cut from the canal and the remnants of two old lock gates

'planted' in the field behind to whimsically suggest a continuation of the canal. A little past the canal house, was a canal boat with two buckets of blue flowers, and whilst smiling at the decoration in the field, across the canal was a 'zebra'; at first appearance. A double take showed it to be a horse in Zebra clothing!



Nigel explained that the pylons in the area originally connected to Meaford Power Station, which closed in 1990. Two steam locomotives and two diesel locomotives from the power station are preserved at heritage railways in the North of England, and at the nearby Foxfield Light Railway.

Nearing the end, we discussed the open village garden displays held each year around Barlaston in July. And, as we walked along the tow path, several back gardens border the path, so we had a preview of the talented gardeners' work. A table with some very reasonably priced plants, and an honesty box, enticed a few of us to buy.

On returning to the pub for our meal, we were joined by non-walkers (13 members in all). An absolutely brilliant walk and a sociable meal together afterwards.

Jane Walton

Around Rudyard Lake

July

John, a "Hampshire Hog", took a group of us around Rudyard Lake on a lovely walk.

We started at Hotel Rudyard, where after booking our lunches, we took an uneven path through Rae Cliffe Wood. Here, only tantalising views of the lake could be seen. Soon however after passing a substantial, but neglected gothic styled building, the trees thinned to reveal a large castle-like house with stunning views across the lake.

John gave us a brief history of Cliffe Park Hall and its' associated gate house, both grade 2 listed, but now in great need of much TLC. The hall was built in 1811 by a local merchant, John Howarth, in a neo-gothic style. In 1831 the hall and parklands passed to Fanny Bostock, who prevented the North Staffordshire Railway from exploiting the lake commercially. Eventually the hall was bought by Brian Daley in 1969, but unfortunately, he died in 2015 following an aggravated burglary.

Since then, Cliffe Park Hall has been left to crumble. John referred us to "the Internet" where a full history of the hall can be found, including photos of the inside and outside. Interestingly, during the time when the hall was a YHA hostel, George Orwell stayed there whilst researching "The Road to Wigan Pier."

Next stop was the bridge over the stream that feeds the lake, for the traditional coffee break, and for birders to spot a nuthatch.



We walked back using the track of the old Macclesfield to Uttoxeter line (axed by Beeching in the 1960s). This track bed is now shared with the Leek and Rudyard Railway, one of Britain's great little steam railways. We crossed the dam, built in 1797 to create the lake and provide water for the newly opened Caldon Canal.

Just before the Hotel Rudyard we stopped to admire the carved sculpture of Carlos Trowe. In September 1864, Carlos Trowe crossed the lake on a tightrope carrying a boy on his back. In 2016 Chris Bull re-enacted the event, 150 years after Carlos, but without a boy. The sculpture carved by Anthony Hammond was unveiled in April 2016.

Thank you for leading this walk with us John, a walk full of beauty and interest.

Chris Cooke

Fulford & Moddershall

September

Ten people started out from the Black Lake Inn on the B5066.



We crossed the road and walked down lanes and fields to Fulford, a very attractive village, in unspoilt countryside. We stopped at the village green. It seemed, from the notice boards, to be a very active place.

Then it was up the hill and into woods at Stallington Heath. After the woods, we crossed the B5066 again and down through fields to



Idlerocks, where a very narrow and slippery path led through another wooded area. Deer fencing was evident, but there were no deer to be seen! There then followed an excellent coffee and cake stop at the Rock House Café, opposite the Boar Inn at Moddershall.

Three more people joined us there for the shorter walk, up a wooded lane, passing several millponds (originally milling flint and flour), then fields near the Health Spa at Moddershall Oaks, and back to the Black Lake Inn, where we had a delicious lunch.

Thank-you Nigel, for organising, and for your ingenious 'board bridge' to help us on our way!

Helen Air

Visits

Fish & Chip Canal Cruise

July



Following on from the successful 'Chippy Cruise' last year, we decided to take to the water again.

Setting off from Parkgate Lock just after midday, we travelled, at a very leisurely pace towards Acton Trussell, passing through several locks on the way. I've often watched boats going through the locks, but I've never observed the brickwork of the lock walls at such close quarters - you have to marvel at the engineering involved.

Piping hot fish and chips were served with tea and coffee on the outward part of the journey. Then, following our excellent meal we began to discuss how pleasant it was, to take life at a slower pace (totally at odds with the modern world!). On reaching the Moat House Hotel, we turned around, continuing our discussions, and 'putting the world to rights' (as you do). 😊



Many thanks to Margaret Winfield, for organising this very pleasant afternoon out, on the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal.

Nigel Holmes

Leicester Cathedral & Richard III Visitor Centre September



On 18th September, led by Margaret, 23 of us enjoyed a trip to Leicester.

Our first stop was the King Richard III Visitor Centre. After a short introduction and armed with a map provided by a welcoming guide, we were left to explore the centre.

The ground floor areas give details of Richard’s background, his rise and fall and the battle of Bosworth. On the first floor the story continues with Shakespeare’s take on Richard and an impressive display following the rediscovery of Richard’s grave.



The work of historians, archaeologists and money from Ricardians, was required to find and complete the task, while extensive science was needed to prove that the skeleton found was the real deal. We saw the actual grave site, now preserved under glass, on the ground floor.

After lunch, in the aptly called ‘White Boar Café’, we trekked over the road, passing King Richard III’s statue, and into Leicester’s Cathedral. Here, our guides focused on King Richard III’s imposing tomb and the Richard III Redemption window, which includes a football marking Leicester City winning the Premier League in 2016.

With some time to spare, some of us wandered next door and into Leicester Guildhall, a medieval gem, for coffee and cake before boarding the coach back to Stafford.



Thank-you Margaret. This trip ticked all the boxes; a pleasant and capable coach driver, accessible, clean and plentiful toilets, pleasant and uncrowded coffee stops and the sun came out!

John Hibbs

With thanks to...

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