

Spring Safari.

Tuesday 18th May to Friday 21st May 2010.

This year we went to the rural North Essex, South Suffolk area. Our meeting point for lunch on Tuesday was the "White Hart" at Coggeshall and, having arrived very early, I found myself a coffee and then toured the "town", this did not take long. The museum was closed and the only point of interest was a delightful garden centre, "The Secret Garden", a long winding path with many plants and ornaments for sale, quite an oasis and most attractive.

This year our group included four ladies, Helen, Jackie, Lynn and Ros, and what a delightful addition they were. We men certainly enjoyed their company.

After lunch a relatively short walk took us soon out of Coggeshall and into typical East Anglian country - large fields, no hedges, acres and acres of corn and, possibly, sugar beet, nice and flat for us "oldies" and very few stiles. Such was the flat and open nature of the area that it did not take much imagination to visualise the American 8th Air Force flying their bombers from these fields during the Second World War.

Our hotel, at Stoke by Nayland, well to the North of Colchester, is beautifully situated in the countryside. Within a "golfing" orientated complex, it provided everything we wanted except that the service at dinner was very slow.

Wednesday dawned bright and warm. Our starting point, in Sudbury, some 10 miles from our hotel, was on the edge of the town and, with the help of three or four residents who gave me directions, we all gathered, ready for a four-mile walk beginning along a disused railway track, easy walking and well shaded on a hot day. We walked on to open meadows adjoining the River Stour. At one place there was a weir and a "salmon leap" made perhaps a 100 years ago (sadly there are now no salmon in the Stour) and later a "Victorian Bathing Place"; neither were there any Victorian bathers.

Such was the weather, we had lunch out of doors and then we headed for Long Melford, about four miles away, where Les Best, our leader had again found us free parking. We were soon heading west into more enormous fields. Where had all the hedges gone and where do all the little birds nest? The ground was extremely dry and even the drainage ditches were not wet. One of them was crossed by Suffolk's version of the Thames Millennium Bridge with, bearing in mind its comparatively small size, a considerable swing. However we were soon back at the car park, all safe and sound. Sadly I could manage only two days this year and so, with much regret, had to leave the party and make for home.

Les, and his aides Derek and Nigel, did a wonderful job and I would like to say a big thank you. Having myself organised several Spring Safaris I have a fair idea of how much is involved.

Les Best continues - on Thursday Nigel led us to East Bergholt from where we had a two of three miles easy walking to Flatford Mill famous for

Constable's painting of "The Hay Wain". The immediate surroundings are not as open as they were in 1821 when the painting was made but the main houses remain and it is possible to imagine the original scene. We had a light lunch at the National Trust tea room and then spent some time wandering along the river and sitting in the sunshine. We walked back to East Bergholt where some of us had a look at the church. What was particularly interesting was that the bells are mounted in a bell-cage in the churchyard. Apparently when the tower was being built in the 1530s the money ran out and the bell-cage was built as a temporary measure. The bells are still rung regularly using a system of levers and not ropes.

The main drawback to the hotel was the dining room; it was extremely noisy. Alf has noted that it catered for golfers and on the first two nights there were golfing parties and I thought they were the ones responsible for the din. On Thursday we were the only party dining and I must admit that we were pretty noisy. In the end I came to the conclusion that I couldn't really blame the golfers but only the acoustics. The meals were good and seemed to improve from Tuesday to Thursday and the very slow service noted on Tuesday was not repeated. Probus Chairman, Tony Wakeford, joined us for dinner and was in sufficiently good voice to make himself heard over the general racket.

We returned home on Friday, a little tired from having walked more than usual, but adequately watered and perhaps slightly over fed. I must express my thanks to Derek Hill and Nigel Wallington for their invaluable help in organising the Safari and to the Chairman for his presence at Thursday's dinner.

Alf Butterworth