

Cautionary Tales: reminiscences of organising group visits

Soon after Chester Civic Trust was formed in 1960, visits to other towns were arranged. The idea was to learn about the problems other civic societies and local authorities face and how they solve them. In this way our comments on local issues can be made from an informed and enlightened standpoint.

In 1990 it was suggested that we travel further than could be achieved in one day and the idea for our first weekend away became a reality with a visit to Kingston-upon-Hull. We asked a local company to help us plan and book the visit and their representative, Val Williams, accompanied us as a tour guide. This visit was so successful we quickly planned a follow-up for the next year with an even more ambitious trip to Dublin. Again Val was the organiser and we enjoyed a mayoral reception, a 'poets' pub-crawl and various other delights.

On reflection we thought this visit was perhaps too biased towards history rather than architecture and planning issues. We also had to factor in the cost of the organiser and it was suggested that we could book a coach and a hotel more cheaply for ourselves. And so we became amateur tour operators with a few tales to tell.

A dilemma

When we went to Dublin we had with us a member who had a difficulty in walking. While we were very sympathetic to her, it was not possible for the party to keep to the schedule as she could not keep up. Unfortunately she was a difficult person to deal with. When she wanted to book for the next trip, we suggested she use a wheelchair and brought a friend with her, either to push her so she could keep up with us or to spend time with her when she could not. We said the friend would only have to pay for the hotel accommodation; all other expenses would be met by the Trust. She was not happy; perhaps she had no friend willing to spend some time with her. For a few days we half expected to see a headline in the local newspaper 'local society refuses to take disabled member on visit.' But she must have come to terms with the situation and, sadly, she died not many years afterwards

Colchester

The choice of hotel follows quickly after the decision as to which town to visit. We encourage members to suggest towns or cities they are familiar with and I grew up near Colchester in Essex. We prefer to find a hotel in the town centre, there are often large hotels on the outskirts of town but they do not allow for personal exploration. There was only one hotel in Colchester with sufficient bedrooms for a party of our size – the Mill Hotel. The description sounded good and the location was ideal. However, when we arrived we encountered our first problems. Members were given keys to rooms already occupied! Others experienced so much noise from the bar below they changed rooms in the middle of the night. Dinner was served at two long adjacent tables and the staff only began to serve each course when everyone

at both of the tables had finished what they were given and so dinner was a very long, drawn out affair.

The current chairman of their Civic Society had been elected Mayor of Colchester and was unable to accept our invitation to talk to us in the evening. In her place came the previous chairman. Asked to tell us about problems encountered in the town, she proceeded to tell us what a dead loss she thought the new chairman was. Most embarrassing as the Mayor had arranged a civic reception for us the following morning. The hotel confused the two women and thought the Mayor was coming to the hotel and dressed their staff in their full livery for the occasion.

At dinner the second evening we were somewhat bemused when the young man who had been on duty in reception came into the dining room, wearing his cycle clips, and informed us in a broad Essex accent 'Well, I be going home now'. Perhaps he was indispensable!

Bury St Edmunds

For many years we used the same coach company and were very pleased with their driver, John, who would point out to us any members he felt needed 'looking after', took it upon himself to see that everyone boarded the coach at the appointed time and we came to think of him as one of us. Many of you will remember one member and his electric buggy, which enabled him to come on our trips and accompany his wife to all the places we visited. The year we went to Bury St Edmunds, his wife phoned a few days before we were due to leave to confirm that the buggy could be taken in the luggage hold. We phoned the coach company to enquire and, to our horror, were asked 'what trip to Bury St Edmunds, we have nothing in our diary?' Although we were able to find copies of the relevant e-mails, and it became obvious the coach company had not carried the information over to the new diary, the fact remained we had no coach. Pat and I sat in the Office in BLP, where we had been putting together the packs to take with us, awaiting a call from the manager of the coach company. Eventually he said he had been able to find a coach from one firm and a driver from another. Had the member not phoned us, the party would have been waiting at the pick-up points wondering why no coach appeared. (We always sent an itinerary to John, our favourite driver, before we set off on our visits and we received a message from him, 'I am in Europe, I can't be with you'.)

That was not the end of the story. The coach was obviously an old one and the driver unfamiliar with it. On the return journey we pulled into the car park for a break and he said he was not happy with the engine. He allowed us to go to have our refreshments and then tried to start the coach when we were ready to leave but it would not go. For the first, and hopefully only time, we had to wait for another coach to come and take us the rest of the way home.

Durham

Perhaps the most distressing experience was on our arrival in Durham. We had arranged for the coach to take our luggage to the hotel while we were being taken on an introductory walking tour. We were assured by the hotel that the cases would be in our rooms when we got there. Unfortunately one of our member's bags was missing and it was the one containing essential medication, not something available from the local pharmacy. We insisted that the bag had been on the coach and therefore should be in the hotel and that a thorough search be made for it. Meanwhile the member was making enquiries as to where the nearest dispensary was likely to be. Eventually, after what seemed like an age, the bag was found in a room that was never used by guests! We were all upset by this and made pointed comments such as 'a bottle of wine, as compensation, wouldn't go amiss'. It made us very wary about having cases go on ahead.

Newcastle

A friend recommended the Conservation/regeneration officer of Newcastle City Council. A group of six former Geography students had visited and were very well led around the Georgian part of the city. We contacted him and he arranged for himself and a colleague to take us on what was a very interesting tour.

We had contacted a local society and they offered to guide the coach to the coast where we parked and it was suggested we explore a small island just offshore while the two hosts had an ice cream. I hope it was ignorance on their part but, as we began to cross the causeway, we became aware of the tide rising on either side. We called across to those who had already reached the island and stopped anyone else going forward. The intrepid explorers were forced to remove their shoes and socks and roll up their trousers to paddle back to dry land.

Limerick

Another visit to Ireland and an Irish coach driver. We spent the first morning exploring Limerick on foot and had arranged a visit to the coast for the afternoon. Our driver explained he could stop outside the hotel for the minimum amount of time so everyone was to be ready and waiting. We boarded and set off. The driver suggested we look at a derelict house he thought would be of interest to us. When we got back on the coach we counted heads and found we were two passengers short. We scoured the area surrounding the house and decided they must have been left in Limerick. We continued our journey but, because of the unscheduled stop and the subsequent search we arrived later than intended. Much to the disappointment of at least one passenger, we were unable to explore the Burren and the limestone pavement famous for the variety of flowers growing in the crevices.

We later learned that the husband who missed the bus was not at all happy. Apparently he had mentioned that his wife was still upstairs to two other

members but we could not have held up the coach. The wife said they enjoyed a trip on a public bus to see the surrounding countryside. Always count the passengers!

On the return journey to the airport we made the mistake of asking whether we could include a visit to a castle which looked very interesting. The driver said it would be possible and we took him at his word. Unfortunately we were then late for all subsequent arrangements, a heritage officer stood for forty five minutes waiting to show us around; lunch, which was pre ordered, was growing cold and some members did not have time for dessert let alone coffee.

Eventually we arrived at the airport. Pat went ahead to make sure we approached the correct desk, Richard and I took the end position to check that we did not lose anyone on the way. When we approached the gate it closed with us on the wrong side! We were confused as we were booked onto the flight so why could we not proceed? Eventually Richard was allocated a seat usually occupied by the cabin staff while I was upgraded to business class. He thoroughly enjoyed being made a fuss of by the staff while I felt ill at ease between two businessmen. A meal was served, which I did not need, and I didn't know how to retrieve the tray until one of the men took pity on me. Stick with the itinerary.

Poland

On leaving Warsaw for Krakow, the lovely young guide and her boy friend, helped us on to the train with our luggage and finding our seats, only to find the train abruptly left the station with them on board - all the way to Krakow! We had a whip round to help with their return fares.

Another memorable thing happened in Warsaw - two members went for dinner on their own in the town centre; on leaving, the wife asked the manager to call a taxi. When they got up to leave, the restaurant owner insisted on taking them in his car-must have been a hatchback, as it had to carry a wheel chair - would not hear of payment. A very kind gesture.

Italy

Peter B. and Pat B. organised an excellent visit to Italy with our base in Padua. Everything went to plan until the return journey. We arrived at the airport and checked in our luggage. Together with the passengers for another flight, we waited and waited; not enough seats for so many people and several of our party were left standing. Eventually we were informed there would be no flights to England that day as the incoming planes had been unable to land and had been diverted. We should retrieve our luggage.

What to do? First Pat joined a queue and managed to secure twelve places on the morning flight the following day and the remainder of the party on an afternoon flight to Stansted. Where would we spend the night? Ask the coach drivers parked outside if they knew of a hotel and one did, a hotel recently refurbished not serving food but the bedrooms were available - wonderful.

And how to get back to Chester from Stansted - phone a member who did not travel with us and ask him to obtain the telephone number of our usual coach company. Could they collect us - yes they could. So we were able to enjoy an additional night in Italy and, for some, an additional day as well. With the claims against travel insurance and the refund from the air company, we were not really out of pocket.

Calke Abbey and Harold Staunton

Usually the staff of National Trust properties are very helpful but not when we visited Derby and chose Calke Abbey for the morning of our last day. When we phoned to book they failed to point out that the coach entered the grounds from one village and exited through another. We chose the wrong one to book our lunch. The coach had to drive quite a long way to reach the pub but the meal was excellent. We had explained to the people at Calke Abbey that we would like to visit the church in Harold Staunton, also administered by the Trust, and could they let them know to expect a coach party. We arrived at the car park serving the church and a craft centre a few minutes before the church was due to close. Pat, the driver and I set off to find the church and ask for it to remain open. The driver suggested a short cut to Pat and off she went without realising she was crossing a private garden. The owner was not very pleased to see her. However, she just managed to stop the door of the church being closed, the steward had not received a message that we were coming. We then relied on mobile phones to encourage the rest of the party to make their way to the church without taking a short cut.

Belfast

For some years we had considered visiting Belfast but then the Troubles would flare up and, although much of the city was safe, we knew members would be reluctant to go. After the peace agreement and election of members to Stormont, we approached the civic society who could not have been more helpful. We usually try to take gifts, even though modest, to our hosts but this was the first time we were publicly thanked for coming and Pat and I received presents of Irish linen.

Sheffield

We were a little later contacting the Civic Society than usual but had no acknowledgement of our e-mail. Given another contact by Civic Voice we tried again and waited, to no avail. Eventually we received the suggestion that we contact Urban Splash who unfortunately were unable to assist. Remembering our visit to Newcastle, and on another occasion to Birmingham, when the local councils had been only too happy to show off their achievements, I contacted Sheffield City Council. I had a very helpful representative who explained all they could do but there would be a small fee. I blithely said we would not expect them to be out of pocket imagining a cost of, say, £2.50 a head. It came as a complete shock when the figure of £25 each was quoted. I referred the amount to the Hon. Treasurer who managed to reduce it to £20, which was far more than we could afford, but time was pressing and there

was no alternative. A sign of the times when a Council has to make sure it pays its way.

Despite the occasional problem we encountered I have enjoyed working with Pat to arrange residential visits. I have explored towns and cities I would not have otherwise visited and met many friendly and interesting people who belong to their local societies or work in planning offices. Pat and I look forward to further visits ably organised by other members of Chester Civic Trust.

Jan Hore
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