

CIRCUIT HOLIDAY 1st – 5th July 2024

Well, this was the 3rd Circuit Holiday that I've been on, and most enjoyable it was!



We travelled to Eastbourne, as we did in 2022, but we stayed at a different hotel, and our trips out each day took us to pastures new.

Gordon picked up those of us from AMC first this year, so we were all ready and waiting for the coach at 9.30am on Monday 1st July; then on to Chinnor, Princes Risborough, Haddenham and Thame to collect the rest of our fellow holidaymakers!

We stopped for a 'comfort break' at motorway services, which had loads of outlets for food and drink as well as plenty of seating outside to enjoy the warm sunshine. They also have an attractive lake around the rear of the building, with fish and water plants, although some of us only discovered this on our return journey.

Our hotel, The Afton Hotel, was opposite Eastbourne pier – perfect for a stroll 'out to sea' in the sunshine, and to have a panoramic view of Eastbourne seafront. We were very happy with The Afton Hotel: the rooms were good, the food excellent, the staff friendly and helpful, and the evening entertainment provided was very good.



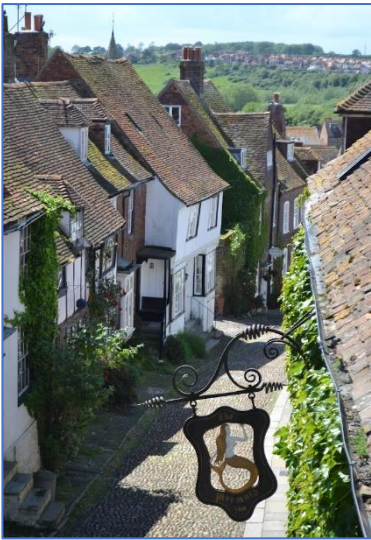
We arrived in time for a pleasant walk along the seafront before dinner, and an excellent young lady singer to entertain us in the evening, for those who wished.

Our first trip of the holiday, on **Tuesday**, was to Rye and Hastings after a delicious breakfast, cooked to order.

Before we left each morning, we had a short time of worship, with prayers, a hymn and a Bible reading, to set us up for the day ahead, and mostly led by Heegon, with Pete providing the music and Jane leading us in singing. I felt quite emotional on the Thursday morning, as we sang 'Wide, wide as the ocean' – a song I hadn't sung since I was little.

The ancient Cinque Ports town of Rye is one of the prettiest towns in East Sussex, perched on top of a hill with stunning views across Romney Marsh and the Rye Harbour Nature Reserve. Once surrounded by sea, Rye played an important role in the defence of the south coast of England, as a member of the Charter of the Cinque Ports. The Medieval town is dotted with crooked half-timbered houses, cobbled streets and secret tunnels and passages, once the haunt of smugglers and highwaymen.

The French attacked Rye regularly, testing the defences and raiding the port. In a devastating attack in 1377, Rye was almost completely destroyed by fire, and the bells of 12th



Mermaid Street & Inn

century St Mary's Church were stolen. The following year, a revenge voyage saw the bells returned, along with other previously stolen loot. After a welcome coffee at one of Rye's many cafes, and a walk around the town, some of us visited St Mary's Church, and I was struck by the beauty of the statue of Jesus on the cross, made from driftwood.



Near the top of Mermaid Street, Rye has one of England's oldest and loveliest inns, the famous Mermaid Inn, with Norman cellars dating from 1156.

On, then, to Hastings, and to find some lunch in one of the Old Town's winding streets and tiny passageways, among Tudor houses and cottages, just up from the fishing quarter with its towering net shops and ramshackle huts on the beach. Hastings has the largest fishing fleet in Europe, that is launched from a beach known as the 'Stade'.



was allowed only a small space.

The unusual 'net shops' on the seafront are tall black wooden sheds unique to Hastings, and are used by the fishermen to store fishing gear. They are tall and narrow, with two or three floors, and some with cellars, because when they were first built in early Victorian times, the sea came much closer to the cliffs so each one



Hastings Castle ruins

Hastings Castle, built by William the Conqueror, but now in ruins, is at the top of West Hill. The steepest funicular cliff railway in Britain takes you from the Old Town, up through a tunnel of rock, to the Castle. A few of us took a ride up to the top of West Hill to see the panoramic view of Hastings. Well worth the trip and quite exciting.



West Hill Cliff Railway

On the lift, we met a lady on her way up to her house with some furnishings, as it was quicker than taking a car all the way round and down into the town and back.

Time was limited by then, so we had a short walk along the cliffs and a quick look at the outside of the castle ruins.

Then, back down the cliff railway, and onto our coach back to the hotel for a shower and change, ready for dinner and the evening's entertainment – this time a Country & Western Singer.

We were delighted with the weather during the week, as reports of rain back home had made us apprehensive. But we were very fortunate, with only one or two short, light showers the whole time we were out and about, and none of us got wet!!



Wednesday saw us off for a visit to the Bluebell Railway at Sheffield Park station, on the southern bank of the River Ouse. The Bluebell Railway was the first preserved standard gauge passenger line in the world, founded in 1960, and Sheffield Park station has a wonderful museum telling its history, as well as workshops, café and shop.

Interestingly, the Greenwich meridian line passes through the station at one point. (The meridian line in Greenwich represents the Prime Meridian of the world, Longitude Zero (0° 0' 0"). Every place on the Earth is measured in terms of its angle east or west from this line).



After visiting the museum, etc, we boarded the lovely, restored old steam train, Sir Archibald Sinclair, for our 11-mile journey to its northern terminus at East Grinstead.



East Grinstead's personal claim to fame is that The High Street contains one of the longest continuous runs of 14th-century timber-framed buildings in England.

We walked along, admiring the buildings and deciding which of the many cafes to choose to eat our lunch.



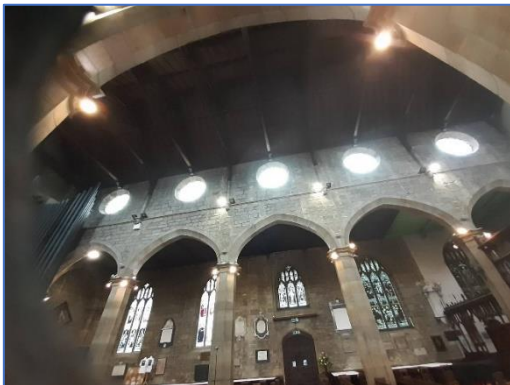
At the far end of the High Street is Sackville College, a gorgeous sandstone Jacobean almshouse, founded by Robert Sackville, Earl of Dorset, in 1609 and still in use today, providing accommodation for the elderly. (It's called a college as the residents originally lived a 'collegiate' life with their own rooms, but all coming together to eat together).



Sackville College



In 1853, the warden of Sackville College, John Mason Neale, wrote the Christmas carol, 'Good King Wenceslas'! His tomb can be seen within the grounds of nearby St Swithun's Church, along with memorial stones to the three Protestant Martyrs, burnt at the stake in 1556 for not renouncing their Protestant faith.



St Swithun's Church has some really beautiful traditional stained glass windows, but I was intrigued by the row of round windows up high, one of which has a flying Guinea Pig in the decorative panes surrounding the central picture. The 'Guinea Pig' name was chosen by airmen being treated for severe burns at the Queen Victoria Hospital in East Grinstead, during the Second World War. Treatment was

pioneering and experimental, which is why the airmen called themselves 'Guinea Pigs', after animals used in experiments.



During the late 1980s, these windows were installed on the south side, thanks to generous donors, some of whom asked for their pets to be depicted, so there are also three heads of dogs and a cat in the various windows. The central scene, within the roundel, depicts the presentation of the Baby Jesus to God, at the Temple in Jerusalem, 40 days after His birth.

After an interesting wander around the town, and visiting a few of the very good shops in adjacent streets, we returned to East Grinstead station for our return trip to Sheffield Park, and back to the hotel, happy and tired and ready to enjoy our dinner.

That evening, instead of enjoying the hotel entertainment, a number of us went out to the nearby Royal Hippodrome Theatre to see 'A NIGHT TO REMEMBER' – a show of dance, song and comedy, with a fantastic company of local professional performers. Most enjoyable!

On **Thursday**, the last day of our holiday, we were off on the coach to Paradise Park and Gardens, near Newhaven. The area is great for both young and old, with planthouses, lovely gardens, a Planet Earth museum, dinosaur safari, and playzone, along with a superb garden centre. And, importantly, a coffee shop overlooking the gardens, which have several small waterfalls, fountains, and lakes teeming with fish. A Sussex History Trail winds through the gardens, with handcrafted models of historic Sussex landmarks. After enjoying coffee and a snack, and a visit to the gardens for some, we climbed back on the coach for a visit to Lewes, the county town of East Sussex.

Lewes is a lovely town, with its medieval streets, old English churches and tiny 'twittens' (a Sussex word for alleyway, which my Mum always used) – see my photo of Church Twitten – I was so excited to see it!



Although surrounded by chalk cliffs, the town is dominated by the remains of a Norman castle, and is also home to the handsome town house of Anne of Cleves (fourth wife of King Henry VIII), given to Anne as part of her divorce settlement, and now housing Lewes museum.



St Michael's Church

We climbed the hill towards the castle – and what a climb it was, starting off a gentle slope and becoming steeper and steeper! We needed quite a few pauses to 'admire the view', looking in the many antique shop windows, and taking a few photos.



15thc bookshop



Having reached the top, we still hadn't found Lewes Castle, so I asked a BT man and he kindly looked on his phone satnav. Of course, we'd passed the turning some way back, so had to retrace our steps. We admired the castle and its gardens from outside, but didn't go further. We were desperate for lunch by then, and found a small café tucked away in a side street.

Then the long descent back down the hill (but it was easier on the way down!).





Along the lower part of Lewes High Street, among the many lovely shops and cafes, there is a bridge across the River Ouse where you can sit and watch the water flow past.



It seemed no time at all before we were due to meet Gordon and the coach, ready for the return journey to Eastbourne. But Gordon, knowing that we were sad to be coming to the end of our holiday, took us the pretty route back, stopping at Beachy Head for the bravest of us to face the 'gale force winds' (I exaggerate!) to have a look over the cliffs - from a VERY safe distance! A few even had an icecream from the van parked there.

Some of us were dropped by Gordon at the far end of Eastbourne seafront to visit the Lifeboat Museum before it closed for the day, and to enjoy a brisk and very pleasant walk along the prom back to the hotel, to stretch our legs.

After dinner on our last evening, we had our traditional 'in-house' entertainment, with a wonderful mix of singing, recitations, poems, stories, dancing and music. Always very entertaining and very well received by us all.

(Photos of audience and some of the acts, courtesy of Heegon).





On **Friday**, after leaving our packed suitcases outside our doors for collection by the very helpful staff, a last hearty and delicious breakfast, and our final time of worship, we climbed onto the coach and gave a virtual wave to Eastbourne as we began our journey back home.

We'd forgotten to take our group photo before we left, but managed to fit it in on our return visit to the motorway services, so all was well.



We were all very weary by the time we were dropped off at our various towns and villages, but it was the happy and contented weariness of a seaside holiday well-enjoyed!

We give our very grateful thanks to Jane and Pete for organising and leading the holiday; to Heegon for looking after us all and for his ever-present smile; and of course to Gordon for keeping us entertained, while driving us safely all over Sussex, and putting up with all our foibles!

*Jennie Torpey
August 2024*