

VISIT TO LUDLOW

In October 2010, forty Friends of Salisbury Cathedral set off for a short break in Shropshire. On the way we stopped at Witley Court in Worcestershire. At one time this 19th century mansion was one of the great country houses, but a disastrous fire in 1937 left what English Heritage describe as a 'spectacular ruin'. The beautifully landscaped gardens have however been restored and contain a number of fountains, the largest of which, representing Perseus and Andromeda, we were able to see in operation at midday. Fortunately the adjoining 18th century church escaped the fire and the approach does not prepare one for the amazing Italianate Baroque interior. The paintings on the ceiling and many of the painted glass windows were originally in the palace of the Duke of Chandos near Edgware – sold off to pay the duke's gambling debts!

From 'the most sumptuous classic interior in England' (which is how John Betjeman described Great Witley Church) we travelled to 'the most handsome inn in the world' which is how the New York Times described the Feathers Hotel, Ludlow. (We only have the best on these tours.) The amazing carved frontage dates from 1619. Here we stayed for two nights, though the majority of us would gladly have extended this. After checking in we had a tour of this delightful town which, like Salisbury, is built on a grid plan. Our guide was a colourful reincarnation of the Georgian architect Thomas Farnell Pritchard who had designed many of the buildings, so he obviously knew what he was talking about!

Before returning to the Feathers for dinner we visited the castle. The original parts date from the end of the 11th century when it was built on the strategic cliff above the River Teme. It was one of a series of castles built in the area as defence against the unconquered Welsh, and in 1475 Ludlow became the seat of the Council of the Marches (the name given to the English/Welsh border area) and the castle became the residence of the President of the Council. The council was not abolished until 1689 so the castle's long use explains the mixture of architecture from Norman, medieval and Tudor. The ruined roofless chapel is one of the only five surviving circular churches in England (they were modelled on the church of the Holy Sepulchre in



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Jerusalem.) The castle became redundant and during the 18th century gradually fell into ruin, though enough remains for the former grandeur to be appreciated. Several of us climbed to the top of one of the surviving turrets with the reward of an excellent view over the town and surrounding countryside. In 1811 the castle was purchased by the Earl of Powys, so the Welsh got in after all.

Ludlow contains over 500 listed buildings but Shrewsbury has over 600, and that is where we went the next morning. The town is built on what is almost an island, the River Severn flowing round three sides. On the section of land not surrounded by water is another castle built in 1083 to keep the wilder inhabitants of Wales at bay. This was rebuilt over the centuries and now houses a regimental museum. Our first stop however was at the abbey, surviving from a medieval monastery built just across the river. This was opened especially for us, and after the volunteer guides had served refreshments and given us a little history, we were able to explore this impressive if rather gloomy building. However, some were rather disappointed not to meet Brother Cadfael whose spiritual (and fictional) home this was. There are two road bridges across the Severn, the English Bridge and the Welsh Bridge, and we crossed the former into the old town. Here we had an informative guided tour of this fascinating town with its many timber framed black and white houses overhanging the narrow streets and steep alleyways. After lunch we were free to explore the town further. Our rendezvous for the coach was by the attractive Quarry Park overlooking the river and opposite this, as a change from the many medieval churches we had seen earlier, we could visit the late 18th century church of St Chad. Though not strictly a round church such as the chapel in Ludlow castle, it does nevertheless have a circular nave ensuring that every member of the congregation has a clear view of the preacher.

After returning from the county town we had a tour of Ludlow's parish church of St Laurence. This fine building with its pinnacle tower (which many of us opted to climb) dates mainly from the 14th century. The ubiquitous George Gilbert Scott had a hand in its 'restoration' in the 19th century, but it still retains some fine 15th century carved stalls and screens. The next day, Sunday, there was the opportunity to attend the early service there.

Following our last hearty breakfast at the Feathers we departed for Bridgnorth. This attractive town is in two parts, Low Town on the River Severn, and High Town



Friends enjoyed staying at the Feathers Hotel

where we spent most of our visit. The early 12th century castle (this time built as defence against the Danes) is even more of a ruin than the one at Ludlow. It was blown up by the parliamentarians in the Civil War who made a bit of a mess of the job, as the remains of the keep now lean at an angle reputed to be greater than that of the tower of Pisa! The main church nearby, St Mary's, was designed by Thomas Telford, better known for his many bridges. There is also an attractive town gate, and an interesting 17th century town hall containing a small museum and refreshment room.

By lunchtime we had all congregated at the railway station where we were to travel on the Severn Valley Railway. This line opened in 1862 to connect Shropshire with Worcester, but was closed 101 years later by the notorious Dr Beeching. Within two years a group of enthusiasts set about restoring the line with a view to running trains southwards from Bridgnorth – the section northwards by then having been redeveloped. They opened the first few miles in 1970 and over the years it has gradually been extended until it now runs for sixteen miles to Kidderminster where it links up with the national rail system. We had reserved seats in a spacious saloon carriage (how trains used to be) and were hauled by a sixty-five-year-old Great Western steam engine – though it did not seem to be in the best of health. As the name suggests, the line follows the river Severn and one of the highlights is crossing the river on the 200-foot span Victoria Bridge.

So having started our tour with 'the sound of an express train', for thus the fountain at Witley Court has been described, we finished with the real thing before returning to Salisbury after a brief but very packed and enjoyable tour, and for this our thanks must go to Kate, Shirley and Tim our driver.

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