

MAGAZINE

issue 5 | December 2019

AG
TO

association of
group travel organisers



Welcome to the winter edition of the AGTO Magazine. With this issue, our fifth already, we're continuing to improve the quality and the variety of the content, bringing you the latest information on the industry together with reports on the activities of our Branches throughout the UK.

It's been a busy time both for myself and for our directors with new Board Directors taking part in their first Board meeting, working with our website designers, attending conferences and exhibitions, and developing new initiatives for members, both Associates and GTOs. You can read more about all of this in the National News Update.

Included with this issue is a diary courtesy of Phil Maree at the Belgian Tourist Office - Wallonia, an Associate Member keen to help you keep track of what's happening in 2020!

Please don't forget this is YOUR magazine so comments, ideas and articles are always welcome. Send your contributions to editorial@agto.co.uk.

On behalf of the AGTO Board I would like to wish you and all our members a fabulous festive period and a prosperous new year.

Wendy Hartley-Scarff
Chief Executive, AGTO

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STOP PRESS!

CJam has now taken over as the AGTO management company. Our contact Jade can be reached on 01787 221022. The email will remain the same.

2020 AGTO SHOWCASE WEEKEND

21st – 23rd February | Stratford-upon-Avon

Have you booked yet? If not why not? Don't delay, places are getting snapped up!

Our Blue Riband event in the AGTO calendar is shaping up very nicely. If you've been to a Showcase Weekend before you'll know how it brings together opportunities to meet fellow GTOs and many of our Associate (supplier) members. You'll know about the excellent fam trips, this time to Shakespeare's England, and you'll know about the Gala dinner and entertainment. You'll also know about the Showcase Exhibition, another opportunity to meet our Associate members and find out about their latest products and how they can help you put together your trips for 2020. If you haven't been before, well, how could you miss all this?

Your Events Committee have worked hard to pull together a great event. All we need now is for you to come and join us in February at Ettington Chase, near Stratford-upon-Avon and enjoy the delights of Shakespeare's England.

If you've misplaced your booking forms, request new ones from agto@agto.co.uk or find them on the website www.agto.co.uk.



Ettington Chase, near Stratford-upon-Avon

GROUP LEISURE & TRAVEL SHOW

AGTO had a great showing at the Group Leisure & Travel Awards and trade show, which this year was held for the first time at Milton Keynes Stadium. It was really good to see so many of our Associate members winning top industry group travel awards. Many congratulations to our very own Sue Shapland who was awarded GTO of the Year 2019. A fantastic result for Sue. Well done!

The exhibition the following day was also very successful for AGTO. The stand was very busy as we launched the

National News Update



first public viewing of the corporate video. A great crowd pleaser! It was great to meet new and old friends and we welcomed many new members to our ranks.

GROUP BUYERS FORUM, SALFORD, MANCHESTER

AGTO had a presence at this event on the 14th October at Salford Quays. A well-organised event but overall not as productive for AGTO as some other events.



ABTA CONFERENCE - THE OVER 50s TRAVELLER

Our CEO attended a one day conference on this very important segment of the travel community. A link to the presentations can be found on our website for the full information.

It was a very interesting day full of facts and figures and practical advice from existing 50+ travellers. We also heard how we can learn from the Japanese, Japan being a country with the largest elderly demographic.

AGTO SOCIAL MEDIA

With the help of one of our new Board Directors, Elizabeth Mounser, AGTO has increased its social media presence enormously with regular tweets in support of our Associate members. There is a new Members Only



group set up on the AGTO Facebook page, with offers and news. Head over to the AGTO Facebook page for more information, and to join. We're also expanding our LinkedIn group page in line with our increased social media coverage. Make sure you join and "follow" the AGTO groups to maximise on your membership and opportunities available.

WTM LONDON

Once again, AGTO supported WTM London by having an Association Partnership Agreement that entitled AGTO members access to the event on all three days. In return AGTO has exposure on the WTM 'Associations' website page together with distributing marketing information within the Association area. It was a good event with many AGTO Directors working the floor and furthering contacts, and GTOs finding new product and services for their future trips.

EXCITING NEWS FOR ASSOCIATE MEMBERS!

AGTO is working with Excursions 2020, the group travel exhibition that takes place at Alexandra Palace in north London on 25 January, to provide a larger, dedicated AGTO area where our Associate members can exhibit at a fraction of the normal cost of a stand. This is a great opportunity for our Associate members to both save money and meet GTOs. Details have been forwarded to all Associate members, but if you haven't seen the information than call our Board Director Elizabeth Mounser on 07949 078593 or email elizabeth@emconsultancy.uk



And finally...

Did you know?

There are 23 million people aged over 50 in the UK.

That's 33% of the population, and 80% of the disposable income.

The biggest and richest group of 'older people' in history.

By 2030 there will be 45,000 centenarians in the UK. In 1951 there were just 270!

Follow the link on the website www.agto.co.uk for the full information. (source: ABTA Over 50s conference)

Stunning Views From Every Cruise

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Guest Columnist: Philippe Maree



Over the last few years when I've been attending travel trade events I've always made a point of talking with group travel organisers to find out what they know about Wallonia and whether they've been.

After the bit about Wallonia being the southern, French-speaking part of Belgium, and explaining what there is to see and do for groups – the opportunity for me to talk about the food and drink, heritage railways, beautiful gardens, historic cities, Christmas markets, well, you probably know the list, GTOs will then usually ask me about hotels. Fair enough, after all, where your group is going to stay is important. But I've often found that that's not really the reason why the GTO is asking the question. What the GTO is really concerned about is the way that continental European hotels look after groups.

One GTO I spoke to was at pains to point out that a hotel in France (a neighbouring country) treated her group as though it was a sports club,

Philippe Maree, Trade Manager with the Belgian Tourist Office - Wallonia, looks at how continental European hotels are adapting to attract more groups from the UK.

very much herding the group into a side room for dinner, with long tables and what was described as average food. The GTO told me that she'd spoken to the hotel manager and the following evening the group sat at tables in the main restaurant. The food remained average though!

In general, the track record of most continental European countries for understanding the differences in the types of group arriving by coach hasn't been great. To many, a coach group is a coach group.

But over the last few years I've noticed a change. Concerned about a drop in the number of UK groups visiting continental Europe, hotels have been upping their game. These days, and in general, the welcome is now more welcoming. The manager will often appear to check that the arrangements for dinner are what you have booked. Hotels are realising that if they want your repeat business, and the value of you returning home with a glowing testimonial, they need to get it right. At World Travel Market in November I sat in on a couple of meetings with

GTOs and was really heartened by the comments I heard about previous group trips.

With this issue of the AGTO Magazine you'll have received our 2020 diary. I hope you find it useful. But its importance doesn't end with it being somewhere to note the next AGTO branch meeting, or a trip to the dentist. I'm finding a growing number of GTOs are saying that it's all very well visiting a town, city or visitor attraction, but to add something new to the experience they're keen to time their visit with a festival or other celebration.

You won't be surprised to learn that we have quite a few of these in Wallonia, from the remarkable Venetian Costume Festival at Annevoie Gardens (1-3 May 2020) to The Amaryllis Festival at Beloeil Castle (25 April to 3 May) and Mariembourg's Steam Train Festival (26-27 September). You'll find more events in the diary.

May I take this opportunity to wish you all the very best for the festive season and invite you to take a closer look at Wallonia in 2020.

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Successful night for AGTO members



This year, following the move of the Group Leisure & Travel Show from the NEC in Birmingham to the Marshall Stadium at Stadium MK in Milton Keynes, the Group Leisure & Travel Awards were held at the Doubletree by Hilton hotel next door on the evening before.

A change is as good as a rest they say, with the new venue offering a well co-ordinated event with great food. Hosting the event was celebrity presenter Martin Bayfield, former England Rugby player and commentator.

This year, AGTO sponsored the 'Excellence Award'. This is awarded for an individual's service to group travel organisers, shining a spotlight on travel industry professionals who go the extra mile for their customers. The award was won by Ellie Fulcher of Fred. Olsen Cruises, one of our long-standing Associate members.

The undoubted star of the evening was our very own Sue Shapland from Exmoor Extroverts who was presented with the award for Group Travel Organiser of the Year 2019. The award has been recognising special people for the last 20 years to highlight great GTOs, finding out about where they go, what they do and more about the people they organise for.

After a great awards evening, AGTO exhibited at the Group Leisure & Travel Show the following day. The launch of our new video was a resounding success, causing several crowd situations around the AGTO stand as GTOs stopped to take a look. Jim Barling from Central Branch ably held the fort with help on hand from Wendy Hartley-Scarff, Elizabeth Mounser and Sue Povey, saying hello to existing members and encouraging many GTOs and suppliers to join the ranks of our GTO and Associate members.

Congratulations to the following AGTO Associate members who won awards:

- Best Museum or Gallery:
V&A
- Best Coach or Tour Operator UK Tours:
Edwards Coaches
- Best Event for Groups:
RHS Garden Wisley Flower Show
- Best Christmas Experience:
Waddesdon Manor
- Best Guided Tour:
Houses of Parliament
- Best Accommodation for Groups:
Daishs Holidays
- Best Group Dining Experience:
Warner Leisure Hotels
- Best Cruise Line:
Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines
- Best Group Tour Operator - Long Haul
just for groups!
- Best UK Attraction:
Coca-Cola London Eye



Welcome

A very warm welcome to our new GTO and Associate members. You can see full details of all our Associate members, and their contact information, on the website.

ASSOCIATE MEMBERS

A6002 Shakespeare's England

Shakespeare's England is a not-for-profit membership organisation and a public private sector partnership. We are supported by the region's key tourism businesses and local authorities, including Stratford District Council, Warwick District Council and Warwickshire County Council. Shakespeare's England is recognised by Visit England and Visit Britain as the official tourism body for the area. Our role is to encourage visitors to South Warwickshire and the surrounding areas for overnight stays.

A6003 Royal Liver Building 360

The world-famous Liver Building takes pride of place at the heart of the city's iconic waterfront, standing as a symbol of Liverpool, its history and its people. As one of the stunning Three Graces on Liverpool's waterfront, Royal Liver Building 360 is a must-see attraction for local, national and international visitors to the city.

Learn about Liverpool's heritage and join the guided tour to the tenth and fifteenth floors to enjoy spectacular 360 views of the Liverpool skyline and experience a world-class digital projection show inside the historic clock tower.

A6005 Cruising Excursions

With more than 100 years of travel experience between our team it's no surprise that since we began, our portfolio of shore excursions has grown into the thousands. We offer an exceptional range of great value shore excursions to suit all ages, interests and abilities. All cruise excursions and multi-port packages are carefully designed to suit your ship's itinerary and we always guarantee to get you back to your ship on time. Our dedicated and passionate team are here for you every step of the way.

A6006 Leonardslee Lakes and Gardens

Leonardslee Lakes and Gardens are described as 'the finest woodland garden in England'. First planted in 1801, the Grade I Listed gardens on the 240-acre estate features outstanding scenery throughout the year and is particularly majestic as it blooms in spring or takes on the glorious colours of autumn.

For a perfect day out you can also visit the renowned Rock Garden and Dolls House Museum, the see rare colony of wallabies and catch sight of the deer roaming free. Then enjoy dining in style or taking high tea in the Grade II Listed mansion, or enjoy more informal refreshments at locations around the estate.

A6007 Shakespeare's Schoolroom and Guildhall

Historian and broadcaster Michael Wood has called Shakespeare's Schoolroom and Guildhall "one of the most atmospheric, magical and important buildings in the whole of Britain". Outstanding timber-framed architecture, rare historic wall paintings and a rich legacy of amazing stories make it one of Stratford's must-see sights.

The Guild of the Holy Cross built the Guildhall between 1418 and 1420. More buildings were added including a schoolhouse, chapel and almshouses and by around 1530 the Guildhall was the most impressive complex of buildings in Stratford. The King's New School (later known as King Edward's VI School of K.E.S) moved into the Guildhall in the 1560s. In 1571 a seven-year-old boy named William Shakespeare started going to school there. K.E.S. pupils still study in the Guildhall today.

A6010 Links Travel and Tours

At Links Travel and Tours we have a vast selection of inspirational small group tours for those who prefer to travel with like-minded

people and suggested itineraries for those who prefer a tailor-made option. We also have a variety of suggestions for those who love sport, including golf in Vietnam and Japan, hiking and mountain climbing in Japan and cycling in China and Vietnam. Our sister company, Sports Link Travel, provides tours to major sporting events across the globe, including cricket, rugby and Formula 1.

A6012 Doucas Tours and Travel

Travelling with Doucas Tours and Travel has always been an experience. Discover the authentic Greece; stay in the best-rate hotels; relax by the most exotic beaches; visit the world-renowned sites; taste the Greek gastronomy; enjoy the natural beauty; learn about local life; participate in special events.

Doucas Tours and Travel offers tailor-made programmes for travellers who like the relaxed blend of nature, local culture and adventure with the combination of highlight destinations or less visited areas in Greece.

A6013 The Great British Car Journey

The Classic Car Driving Experience. Pull out the choke, turn the key and take a trip down memory

lane! Dad's car, Mum's car, your first car... or the one you always wanted? Over 30 classic cars dating from 1935 - 1995.

GTO MEMBERS

E2862	Ms Sally Rogers
N2863	Mrs Yvonne Wancke
K2864	Mr Brett Pearson
S2865	Mrs Elizabeth Morris
W2866	Wendy Savage
W2867	Mrs Sheila Spivey
E2868	Ms Liz Cawdell
S2869	Jane Hopkin
E2870	Mr David Sparrow
E2871	Mr Steven Jones
E2872	Mr Venkat Tikkireddi
E2873	Dr Louise Thomas
C2874	Mr Mark Smith
S 2875	Mrs Pat Lee
S2876	Catherine Grancoise
N2880	Mr David Hartle
W2877	Mrs Dawn Bailey
C2878	Miss Juile Green
E2879	Mrs Natalie Pollard

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AGTO MEMBERS EXCLUSIVE

WIN £100 towards a City Walking Tour

Excursions 2020™ - the longest running group travel show and a must-attend event for GTOs, tour - and coach operators - will take place at Alexandra Palace, London on Saturday 25th January 2020.

Excursions™ brings together attractions, destinations and accommodation providers from across the UK and near Europe, all under one roof, on one day. The show helps drive the growth of new group-travel ideas providing inspiration for group-friendly days out and short breaks.

The show's unique and popular location-based layout groups together exhibitors from the same geographic

BRAND NEW AND EXCLUSIVE AGTO MEMBER EXHIBITOR OFFER

AGTO attends Excursions each year, with the show regularly generating a high number of new member sign-ups. AGTO will be exhibiting at Excursions 2020™, which will also see the first large screen promotion of AGTO's new video promoting group travel.

For the first time, Excursions 2020™ offers AGTO Associates the opportunity to promote their company at this must-attend group-travel show for a fraction of the cost, thanks to a brand new AGTO-Excursions™ Partnership.

To book your space from as little as £150 or for more information please contact AGTO Board Member, Elizabeth Mounser
T: 01759 305997
M: 07949 078593
E: elizabeth@emconsultancy.uk

www.excursionsshow.com  Excursions Show

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2020



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FOR GROUP
VISITS



DISCUSS YOUR
INDIVIDUAL
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PLAN AND
CREATE YOUR
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area, enabling visitors and exhibitors to work collaboratively to create new and exciting itineraries and short breaks and boost travellers to their region.

Excursions 2020™ promises to be another exciting show with many exhibitors promoting new tours, events, anniversary celebrations and more. Excursions 2020™ will also include a Great West Way feature area with stand partners representing the key attractions and destinations along this brand new route through the idyllic countryside, quaint English villages and elegant towns. Meet with the Great West Way exhibitors at Excursions 2020™ to create the ideal itinerary for your travellers, whether it be exploring by coach, rail, boat, bike or foot, and stopping off at UNESCO World Heritage Sites, stately homes, medieval castles or fascinating museums. Create your route, your way.

AGTO members have an exclusive opportunity to win £100 towards a City Walking Tour at the destination of their choice. Simply, bring a group of 20 or more to Excursions 2020 and register on this link: excursions-2020-visitor.reg.buzz/agto-members

All members must register individually for Excursions 2020 via the above-dedicated link and attend the exhibition on the day to qualify for the prize. Prize valid for 12 months.

News from the Branches

So what have the Branches of AGTO been up to recently?

The following reports demonstrate how active our members are whilst also checking out the detail for possible trips with their groups.

Thanks must go to the Associate members who support these activities and who get to meet and network with the GTOs during the trips.

With such a wide scope of venues and attractions, I must admit I'd find it difficult to decide which one would be the most interesting, but it does seem that wherever AGTO members go they enjoy it to the full.

Keep enjoying and keep telling us about your experiences.

Wendy, AGTO CEO



Central Branch's Editor's Message

It's been an unusually quiet period for the Branch, with many of us busy elsewhere in one way or another. However, I was pleased to be able to represent AGTO at two trade events. The Group Leisure & Travel Show, which this year had moved from the NEC to the Marshall Arena at Stadium MK in Milton Keynes, and the Group Buyer Forum, North, organised by Steve Reed Tourism and held at The Lowry, Salford Quays.

Both events gave me the opportunity to meet many of our members and to explain the benefits of membership to non-members.

It was interesting to hear that the Group Leisure & Travel Show, which moved to Milton Keynes from its previous home at the NEC, and had been due to return to the NEC in 2020, is now to stay in Milton Keynes.

But while the general feeling of GTOs at the trade shows was upbeat, the feeling at our Branch committee meeting was less so. A key discussion point was the lack of attendance by our Branch members at meetings, social events and on fam trips. We

spent a fair bit of time discussing why members don't attend. Are we organising the right events? What do our members want us to organise? Where are they willing to travel to?

For those of us who do spend a fair bit of time on AGTO activities, why are our branch members not more willing to participate in the running and administration of the Branch?

Unsurprisingly we didn't come up with definitive answers. Various ideas were put forward: a general lack of financial resources; having to look after grandchildren; having to work longer hours and until a greater age; and simply being busy with their own lives.

This isn't a problem confined to the Central Branch, or indeed to AGTO in general. It seems to be widespread throughout society. Certainly most of the organisations that I'm involved with face the same problem.

I personally believe that social cohesion, or rather the lack of it, is a great contributor to the problem. I've noted that many new houses being built have six-foot-high fences all round them. Worryingly, older estates are

increasingly putting them up, fitting high gates to the entrances. Some developments now have PIN entry gates at the road entrance. All this leads to an isolationist attitude of mind, a pulling up of the drawbridge. This then rubs off onto the attitude to social/community relationships; it creates a mindset that goes against the very idea of community spirit, and of getting together for social events.

One more thing that I think contributes to the problem is that people now move away from their roots to find work. They move into an area that doesn't hold any memories or attachment, again leading to an isolationist mindset.

Of course this doesn't apply to everybody, thankfully. There are still a few who do their best, and I say a big thank you to our members who do support what we do, but I fear that it is a dwindling few! So if you're reading this, wherever you are in the country, do try and support your local Branch. After all, there's nothing more disheartening as a Committee than to organise an event, only for just the Committee to turn up!

Jim Barling C1834

A far from rusty day out by Julia Passmore



The British Ironworks Centre, based in the outskirts of the Shropshire market town of Oswestry, regularly exhibits at group travel trade shows. We decided that it was time we paid the popular attraction a visit.

After a two-hour journey from Nottingham we arrived at the centre to be greeted by a member of staff and given information about what we could see, where we could eat and what was happening.

Interestingly, the meet and greet had started a few



minutes earlier, but this time delivered by giraffes among the trees (although they were more interested in eating leaves than welcome a group of GTOs) and by a dragon sitting on one of the cars in the car park.

Once inside the centre we were able to view the 'zoo' made entirely of iron. Many of the animals are really lifelike, for example the horse, where rust is used to make it an authentic colour. Brilliant!

We had a large group so had pre-booked lunch in the café. This proved to be well worth doing as the café was very popular.

Seating was, well, unusual and very haphazard. Seats were made of items that would normally have been

scrapped including old motorbikes, parts of cars, cinema seats and much more. All very interesting and surprisingly comfortable. The food was simple (jacket potatoes with various fillings, soups, assorted sandwiches and paninis) but plenty of it, well presented and excellent.

We enjoyed three hours exploring all that the centre has to offer before returning to our coach. Just before we left, a member of staff came onto the coach to bid us farewell, with a gift of ice cream for everyone! What a lovely surprise on a hot day. But what's remarkable, especially in this day and age, is that entry to the centre is free. All they ask is a donation (they suggest £1 per person) if possible.

There aren't that many visitor attractions who offer a wave-away, so we were all smiling, and eating ice cream as we once again passed the iron giraffes, still eating their leaves.

It's only around five minutes into the centre of Oswestry where we had time to enjoy the tail end of their market day, view the lovely shops and sit in the park. A perfect end to the day.

I would highly recommend the British Ironwork Centre and Oswestry as a lovely day out for a group, but it is all outdoors so if the weather is inclement you do need to make sure you bring your wellies and raincoats!

Julia Passmore C1859

Silk, Treacle and Ladybird books by Pauline Johnson

One of the benefits of being a member of AGTO are the surprises that occasionally pop into your email inbox. One of these arrived from the friendly team at the Macclesfield Silk Museum and Paradise Mill, who are new Associate Members of AGTO. They were inviting me to attend a familiarisation day. What a worthwhile day this proved to be.

Arriving at 11am we were welcomed with coffee and biscuits and given an introductory Group Visit pack before being taken on an hour-long guided tour of Paradise Mill, led by Trish. She gave us a short





history of how the Cheshire town of Macclesfield became a centre for silk weaving in the 18th century, having previously specialised in buttons made with holly wood which had been covered in silk. Every stage of the process from silkworm to the finished product was explained and Trish demonstrated the various machines used.

Paradise Mill, which had its origins in the mid-19th century, has the largest known collection of Jacquard silk handlooms in their original setting. To see them is like stepping back in time as everything is just as it was when the last weaver left. Only by seeing the machines and the fineness of the strands of silk can you begin to imagine how difficult a job threading the various machines to even begin the process must have been. The threading of the warp took two expert women three days to thread 5,000 strands on to the loom. Women did this type of work whilst the men worked the actual looms.

We were taken into the design studio where we saw a design laid out on graph paper. Each square of design was punched by a machine as holes into cards which were put on the looms to enable the pattern to be woven. There was also an added bonus in being able to see some of the original pattern books

of fabric. Another guide, Dan, then took up the story of the 'Mill in the Museum'. We were shown various looms, including one that had been built to create silk pictures.

However, the most interesting part of the tour for me was learning how the mill had changed its production during the war years. It made silk maps – there is a lovely map dress on view – and the silk being produced was also used for parachutes and silk bandages. We also learnt of a link between the mill and digital technology. Think of the holes in the pattern cards for the looms, and then realise that one of the mill's staff went to Bletchley Park during the war years when the first computer was built. There is another

link, with Egypt, and the museum houses a small display of artefacts.

We enjoyed a light lunch of sandwiches, cake and fruit with tea, coffee and orange juice followed by free time to explore further.

Upstairs within the museum building are workshops for various crafts and there are artisans at work and articles to buy. The shop downstairs sells silk ties, which although not made in the factory do have designs which are from the original Macclesfield silk patterns. As you climb the stairs up to the workspace you can see water colours painted by Charles Tunnicliffe who illustrated some of the famous 'Ladybird' books.

The mill is undergoing some building work at present as adjacent buildings are being converted into flats. However that will mean that during 2020 they will have a new lift to the 3rd floor where the mill display is and also a new café which will seat 50 people. They will still have the small café in the museum as well. There's a maximum of 15 people per tour, so bigger groups would need to be split. The museum and mill can tailor the tours to suit your group. You can explore the museum at your leisure but Ken and I felt that the 30-minute overview was well worthwhile as there's so much



you could easily miss. This is one of those times when guides really do enhance the experience. Certainly we all had lots of questions and Ken and I left wanting to know more. The museum staff are willing to open on a Sunday for a group of a minimum of 30.

On the last Sunday of each month Macclesfield holds its popular artisan 'Treacle Market'. Around 150 stalls fill the historic cobbled Marketplace, Butter Market, St Michaels churchyard and surrounding streets selling unique crafts, food and drink and vintage finds. You might

like to combine this with a visit or even include the two events in a 'sleepover' especially as hotels often offer good rates on a Sunday night.

If there was a disappointment it was noting that along with seven people from local clubs, only two AGTO GTOs and their spouses and one Associate member attended. When a new Associate joins AGTO I feel we really do need to show our support. I have booked a tour for my group in September 2020 and already I have people interested.

Entry to the Silk Museum is by

what the museum calls 'optional donation'. A typical dwell time is around an hour. Entrance to Paradise Mill is by guided tour only and lasts approximately 45 minutes. Groups of 10 or more pay £8.50 per person. The focus of the mill tour can be adapted to fit with your group's interests and the timings can be adjusted to fit in with your itinerary.

To find out more, contact Nikki on 01625 612045, email bookings@silkmacclesfield.org.uk or go to www.macclesfieldmuseums.co.uk

Pauline Johnson C1850

Sonning Mill Theatre and a Bucks meander by Pauline Johnson

As a group we have been going to the Mill at Sonning, a 215-seat dining theatre near Henley on Thames for several years now. Located on an island in the Thames, and originally an old flour mill, the theatre offers a varied programme of visiting shows.

Usually our visits are for a matinée, which we can manage from our base at Nuneaton in a day. However there was a good offer this year for an evening performance. We could get four tickets for the price of three, so long as we booked and paid by a certain time.



The discount enabled me to offer an overnight stop at the Holiday Inn Maidenhead/Windsor, with a short tour around the part of Buckinghamshire that I was born in the next day, at a reasonable cost.

We stopped for a couple of hours at Marlow for free time. Marlow's position on the River Thames is delightful and some of our group took the opportunity to take a boat ride. Others enjoyed exploring the shops and calling in to one of Marlow's many historic pubs for a snack.

Soon we were all back on the coach heading for our hotel, with time to drop off our cases, freshen up and then set off for the theatre. The theatre production was Oscar

Wilde's 'Private Lives', which was as enjoyable to watch as ever.

I was born in Downley, a small village between High Wycombe and West Wycombe. My father was in the furniture trade, which is what High Wycombe is famous for, and learnt to make and then upholster chairs and settees before moving into sales. He eventually had his own business in Leicestershire doing re-upholstery and loose covers and curtains as well as selling and fitting carpets. As we made our way to Wycombe Museum I was able to tell the group all about the history of the 'bodgers' or wood turners as they preferred to be called, based in the woods around High Wycombe.



Wycombe Museum is quite a small museum and all very informal. It prides itself on its display of chairs made in the area including the famous 'Windsor chair'. Before we left to continue our tour we had coffee and cake in one of the event rooms. Entrance to the museum is free but a small donation is appreciated. There's no parking for coaches around the museum but I contacted the local council and arranged short-term parking at High Wycombe Park and Ride at Handy Cross, just two miles away at junction 4 of the M40.

West Wycombe is only about 15 minutes' drive from High Wycombe, and although just one main street with a couple of pubs, a nice coffee shop and several gift shops, it has lots of history. You can buy a walking guide from any of the shops, but as the village was given to the National Trust by the Dashwood family, who still live at Wycombe Park (also owned by the National Trust) it is easy to get this information from their website.

If you have the time, and the energy, then you can walk to the top of the hill where St Lawrence's Church stands. Atop the spire is the Golden Ball, sadly no longer open to visitors. Inside the Ball are seats, and this is where the 'Hell Fire Club' met. You can also go into the Hell Fire Caves at the bottom of the hill. These were created when Sir John Dashwood, during the depression, had workers dig out hard-core for the main road between West Wycombe and High Wycombe, to keep them in employment. My grandmother was in a small working party that helped Lady Victoria Dashwood repair the tapestries that were

found behind plaster in what is now the Yellow Room of West Wycombe Park. Sadly they are no longer there. My parents were pupils of the local music teacher in West Wycombe and were often asked by him to be in the choir that sang at Lady Dashwood's regular soirees. Again there is no parking in the village but our driver managed to find a layby not too far away. Coaches visiting Wycombe Park are advised to park at Piddington in a layby opposite the pub.

Our final visit of the day was to Hughenden Manor, again National Trust. This was the home of Benjamin Disraeli, another member of the Hell Fire Club. At the time of our visit they had the Hillside exhibition, commemorating the secret Second World War map-making unit that was based at the house.

For me this proved to be a very nostalgic tour. Of course, there's so much more around the area that could be the basis of another tour, including the Chinnor & Princes Risborough Railway, and the 'Midsomer Murders' trail based in Thame or around Marlow, part of which we did this time on the way to Sonning.

As an AGTO member I really appreciate the benefit of receiving free entry to National Trust properties (and English Heritage and National Trust for Scotland at that). The savings really add up. One very noticeable thing during the past couple of years is just how many of my group have become individual members of the National Trust. When they have added up the difference between what members and non-members pay for many of the day trips and tours they have found that the annual membership is more than paid for. They also tell me that other groups they belong to have started to include National Trust and English Heritage properties for day trips and they have actually been encouraged to join just to make those savings.

Pauline Johnson - C1850

AGTO Central Branch Committee

Jim Barling - Chairman

Pauline Johnson - retiring Chairman & magazine editor
pauline_a_johnson@hotmail.com

Julia Passmore - Board Director / Treasurer
julia1cpassmore@aol.com

Sally Davison - Committee Member

Pam Russell - Committee Member

Jo Blair - Success Tours - Associate Member

Sue Day - West Midland Safari Park - Secretary, Associate Member

**INTERESTED IN
JOINING THE
COMMITTEE?**

**Email Julia for details
of the next committee
date and venue**

Eastern Branch's Director's Message

This has been a very busy time of the year, with travel trade shows to attend, and, of course, Christmas approaching. The good news is that Eastern Branch is continuing to attract new members, which is very heartening.

Perhaps like most Branches, our meetings regularly discuss how we can improve communication with our members and keep them informed in a way that encourages them to participate with the wider membership and to take advantage of other members' experiences and expertise. We've had some very positive feedback so we are aiming to put some of those ideas into practise to help improve this situation.

We try and combine our Branch

meetings with a fam trip, so for October we found ourselves at Hampton Court Palace in Surrey. Our Associate Member, Historic Royal Palaces, has always been stoic with its support for GTOs and this trip was no exception. Organised by Alex Dixon, HRP's Sales Executive (Groups and Travel Trade), we had a wonderful day that started in a lovely private room where we had morning coffee and an introduction to the Palace. This included an update on highlights for the 2020 programme. Do take a look at the website because it's all rather exciting. Our Branch meeting followed, as did lunch.

Afterwards there was free time to look around. The weather was glorious, with the autumn sun showing off this magnificent Palace

and the grounds.

We were then met by Niall, a Senior Warder, who took us on a special tour of Henry VIII's apartments with wonderful stories and insights into how the Palace changed hands over the centuries. Saving the best until last we were fortunate to be able to see a brand new exhibition. This features a piece of silver cloth discovered in a church that was part of a dress worn by Queen Elizabeth I. Alongside is a wonderful portrait of her wearing the dress.

There was still time to continue our day at the Palace before we all said our goodbyes after a really lovely day. Our thanks to Alex and all the staff at Hampton Court Palace.

Joan Hanks E1976

Soap, Ships and The Beatles by Enid Pamment

Shefford Leisure Group, of which I'm chairman, recently enjoyed a tour to Liverpool, Manchester and Port Sunlight on the Wirral. The itinerary had been arranged by one of AGTO's Associate Members, Just for Groups.

This was a very interesting and busy few days, so nobody had the chance to get bored! Our hotel, the Best Western Manchester Altrincham Cresta Court Hotel was fine, with well-furnished rooms and very helpful staff. Altrincham isn't far from the M56 so although we had a fair bit of travelling to do accessibility to and from the hotel was good.

On this occasion the coach was included in the cost of the tour. The coach driver, Kevin, from I.O.W Tours, was an extremely efficient driver and everyone felt very relaxed. As we all know, the coach driver can make or break a tour. I'm pleased to report that Kevin was very polite, joining us in the evening and chatting to everyone. I would certainly recommend him, both for his driving and thoughtfulness towards the passengers.



All the days were most interesting with excellent Blue Badge Guides. Liverpool is a lovely city, so busy and interesting. Just to enjoy the surroundings is certainly worthwhile, and not forgetting the 'The Beatles' of course. Our itinerary included a boat trip on the Manchester Ship Canal. The very clear commentary made the history of

the canal and the surrounding areas all come to life. The weather was a bit showery but there's plenty of cover on the boat and we didn't get wet!

At Port Sunlight, the unique and beautiful 19th century village created by 'soap king' William Hesketh Lever (later Lord Lever) solely for the Sunlight Soap factory workers, we were welcomed by our guide Steve. He was an exceptional guide, explaining what life was like for the workers and telling us about the houses that they were provided with as employees of the company. Port Sunlight really is like stepping back into another century – a village on its own.

On our return journey it had been suggested we visited

Chester, but due to the floods, and the awful problems with the dam at Whaley Bridge, we all agreed to keep well out of the way. Kevin, our driver, was very good, taking us on a lovely scenic ride through the Peak District before making our way home. It really was a very busy, interesting week and I am sure we all learned a great deal along the way. Our days proved to be more 'educational' rather than just a holiday. The idea of 'buckets and spades' did not even enter our minds!

Thank you to everyone at 'Just for Groups'. You did a grand job for us.

Enid Pamment E1136

Downton in Beamish by Joan Hanks

In the middle of September a group of AGTO GTO and Associate members headed to north east

England for a weekend combining education and familiarisation visits. Organised by group tour operator

Just for Groups, and sponsored by AGTO, Visit Durham, Cairn Hotels, The Auckland Project, Kynren, Beamish The Living Museum of the North, the weekend provided a first-class example of the industry working in partnership.

The base for the weekend was the Cairn Hotels' excellent Holiday Inn Darlington, conveniently located at Scotch Corner on the A1. The hotel team provided an excellent meet and greet. Over tea and coffee we were soon saying hello to our fellow GTOs and Associate members who had travelled from across the country. Having settled into our spacious rooms it was soon time for everyone to meet up again, this time to hear the hotel manager explain how the Holiday Inn Darlington can look after groups. We also heard from The Auckland Project and Beamish The Living Museum of the North who gave us an insight into what we would be doing the following day.

Over a leisurely three-course there were plenty of opportunities to chat to our fellow GTOs. A nice touch, and not something we see very often, saw representatives from the event sponsors moving around tables between courses. It's a great way to



use the time to really get to know more about the various places and products. Perhaps it's something we can have at the AGTO Showcase Weekend in February.

Entertainment was provided by an excellent saxophone and guitar duo and we headed off to bed, little realising that tomorrow would see us meeting a famous television celebrity.

Familiarisation trips are famous for their early starts and the Saturday morning saw us boarding our coach to head to Beamish. Once through the gates we came face to face with our television celebrity. It was the tram that appeared in the ITV series Downton Abbey. Climbing aboard we imagined sitting opposite the butler Carson and housekeeper Mrs Hughes as the tram rattled through the Beamish site and dropped us in the High Street.

If you've been on a fam trip to Beamish you'll probably have visited the room above Barclays Bank. With a view looking down on the trams and the old buses we enjoyed coffee and homemade biscuits. We also watched a short video that explained how Beamish is building a new village that will show how life was like in the 1950s and 1960s.

Free time followed and it was difficult to decide what to see in the time allowed. Most members however

found time to visit Dave's Fish Shop in the colliery village, even if there was quite a queue.

At 2pm we were back on the coach and returning to the hotel for a quick freshen up before departing again, this time to see Kynren in Bishop Auckland, mid way between Darlington and Durham.

You've probably heard of Kynren. Indeed, such is its popularity that you might have been. But if not, what is it? Put simply, it's a history of the north east of England as seen through the eyes of a child. But how to describe it? Well, spectacular, breathtaking, patriotic, emotional, awesome, inspiring really doesn't begin to describe the show. A cast over more than 1,000 volunteers, all trained by professionals, do the most amazing things to bring the past to life. Combine all that with the scenery and effects and you have a visual treat and a truly memorable experience. Oh, did I mention the animals? I won't give anything away but they add a surreal ambience to the spectacle.

We arrived early and were treated to a back-stage visit to see the cavalry horses in their stables, magnificent creatures who have a real bond with their riders and handlers, and a special treat for us. As dusk began to fall, and with the backdrop of the Bishops Castle and a lake providing a

huge natural stage, the show began. For nearly two hours we watched in utter amazement at the huge cast, the changing scenes, and the special effects which make up the background, brought history to life. After the show, and after some champagne and canapés, we had the opportunity to talk to the Riding Master again. We also met the CEO of Kynren which was very special. Returning to our hotel we were greeted with soup and sandwiches awaited us. It was quite a day!

On the Sunday a number of AGTO members visited The Auckland Project and Durham Cathedral. The Auckland Project is all about the town of Bishop Auckland, a project that spans over a thousand years, with seven venues in one beautiful setting.

This was a well organised, enjoyable and altogether memorable trip. I'm already planning a visit with my group for 2020. Sincere thanks go to the following people: Harold Burke at Just for Groups, the manager and team at Cairn Hotels/Holiday Inn Darlington, Francesca Boyle at Beamish, and Amanda and Alice at The Auckland Project.

For more information, go to www.beamish.org.uk, www.aucklandproject.org, www.kynren.com

Joan Hanks E1976

On a wing and a prayer! by Yvonne Hodson

In September I led the Exel Retired Staff Association's visit to Bentley Priory Museum and St. Albans Cathedral.

The first part of our day took us to Bentley Priory, a wonderful 18th to 19th-century Grade II listed country house and deer park located in Stanmore on the northern edge of Greater London. On arrival we were served coffee in the pretty café that's situated in the beautiful garden.

Bentley Priory was the headquarters for Fighter Command during the Battle of Britain, headed by Air Chief Marshall Sir Hugh Dowding, 'The One'. Our guides gave a marvelous insight into what happened at that time, explaining how without 'The Few', who took to the air to defend our skies, and 'The Many', whose tireless work on the ground proved crucial to the whole war effort, victory would not have been possible. There's no doubt the guides made the whole story come to life. It



was interesting and thought-provoking visit.

After our visit to Bentley Priory we travelled to St Albans for our visit to the amazing 11th century St Albans Cathedral. Its full name is the Cathedral and Abbey Church of St Alban or referred to locally as "the Abbey".

After a tasty two-course lunch our party was split into two. Here again we had very informative guides who gave an insight into the history of this wonderful

cathedral. Highlights include the longest nave in England, the Rose Window, and the Watching Loft. It really is quite something when you think that work was undertaken mostly by hand all those years ago. Once again a very interesting visit and thoroughly recommended.

This combined visit was arranged through Greatdays Group Travel (0161 928 2001).

Yvonne Hodson – E1285

Top secret mission at the Science Museum by Catherine Skeggs

As fans of puzzles and clue solving, members of our City Adventurers group were looking forward to visiting the Science Museum's latest exhibition 'Top Secret'.

We did wonder just how secret it would be. Well, for starters, it doesn't appear on the museum map!

Luckily our tickets told us the exhibition was housed in the basement gallery to the rear of the Science Museum. We headed off through 'Space and The Modern World' only to find the lift at that end of the building didn't go to the basement. Taking the stairs,

we found the corridor leading through to the 'Secret Bunker'. We also found out too late that there was a suitable lift that joins the basement to the new building of the museum. But soon we reached our destination.

'Top Secret: From ciphers to cyber security' is a major new exhibition compiled from the collections of GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters) and the Science Museum Group. It features more than 100 different objects including never-before-



seen historical technology, hand-written documents and declassified files. Interestingly, although the exhibition marks the centenary of GCHQ, also known as the UK's Intelligence, Security and Cyber agency, the organisation wasn't officially acknowledged until 1994.

Tickets scanned we entered a corridor leading to the introductory section. This provided a timeline on

the history of codes and ciphers and secret communications.

The room opened out to show various themed areas, such as the shell of a Zeppelin and a mock-up of the 1950s' Ruislip home used by Russian spies Peter and Helen Kroger. Outside a green Bletchley Park hut stood one of the motorbikes used during the Second World War to dispatch intercepted messages. Inside the hut we learnt about the team of Bletchley Park codebreakers, who broke the Enigma code in 1941. On display, as well as an original Enigma machine

were a talcum powder tin used to conceal microdots holding tiny photos of documents, an encryption key used by Her Majesty The Queen to make private phone calls, and the first hotline-in-a-briefcase used by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s.

There was a section containing recorded interviews and anecdotes from GCHQ staff. The last section concerned what is being done to defend against terror attacks and serious crime. This included a display showing social media monitoring,

Convinced we now had what it takes

to crack codes, we descended on the exhibition's interactive puzzle area. A chance to put what we'd learnt to the test! We did rather well.

'Top Secret: From ciphers to cyber security' runs at the Science Museum until 23 February 2020. Tickets are free and can be booked online or in the museum.

Tip: Although there is a café in the basement, it's quite noisy. Better to stop at the café opposite the Power Gallery near the main entrance.

Catherine Skeggs - E2715

Meeting some vintage Essex celebrities by Enid Pamment

One of the challenges we all face is finding new tours that we know, or think, our groups are going to like. I was looking through the new brochure from City & Village Tours and spotted 'Vintage Essex'.

I got in touch with Gyll King and her team at City & Village and in July I found myself leading my group from Shefford Leisure having no real idea what was in store.

We met our Blue Badge Guide, Jan, in Thaxted at the allotted time of 10.30 am, to refresh ourselves with coffee and biscuits in an old coaching inn. We then returned to our coach to enjoy views of the gently rolling landscapes of this rural part of Essex, passing by the well-known chocolate box village of Finchingfield, and then making our way south to the little known Essex Rodings.

Eight villages were full of thatched cottages, timber framed manor houses and farmhouses. The Rodings name comes from the Anglo-Saxon Hrodings who sailed up the River Thames 1,500 years ago, turning right at Barking Creek.

But then, in the middle of nowhere we found ourselves in the village of High Easter, and there stood the garage of Lodges Coaches. This family-run coach operator has a vintage vehicle collection and old ephemera. It's all been collected by the Lodge family who are approaching their centenary in the coaching business.

Inside the garage were immaculately restored coaches dating from the 1940s and 1950s. These vehicles are celebrities in their own right having starred in many TV programmes including the 'Only Fools & Horses' spin-off



'Rock & Chips', 'Rogue Traders', 'The Only Way is Essex' and the British-made film 'Outside Bet', starring Bob Hoskins and Jenny Agutter. Also on display was a replica 'Chitty Chitty Bang Bang'.

In the midst of all these precious vehicles, there were round tables, beautifully laid with bone china and our lunch. Afterwards we were allowed to have another look around before being taken for a ride around this beautiful Essex countryside in both vintage coaches.

On our return, tea was waiting with cream cakes. It was an AGTO member's 70th birthday, so they provided a cream cake and one candle! Naturally we all sang to him.

It was so interesting to learn the history of the family behind the garage and that generations had returned to keep the business running. What an achievement!

Gyll King can help you organise a similar tour. Jan our Blue Badge Guide also deserves a pat on the back. .

Enid Pamment E1136

Zombie apocalypse anyone?

by Catherine Skeggs

Have you ever wondered how you'd fare in a zombie apocalypse?

Should there suddenly be an outbreak of hostile zombies, you'd hope the government had a plan of action. You'd also hope that there was a dedicated team of medics working on a cure.

The good news is that there is such a facility in Stratford in East London where this sort of research is taking place. The bad news is that one of the scientists, Dr Oxy has accidentally managed to turn himself into a zombie!

Our team of plucky explorers (our City Adventurers group) rushed to offer what assistance they could by forming an international team of zombie researchers.

Meeting Dr Oxy's colleague in London's East Village in Stratford, she explained that he had become infected with a zombie virus while working in his lab. In a moment of lucidity, he had chained himself up to carry on his research.

Our team entered the lab to review the doctor's work and immediately found ourselves trapped. The only way out of the room was to find the exit key.

Easier said than done, as to find the key we'd need to solve a range of puzzles. Also, Dr Oxy was still in the lab, somewhere!

Fortunately, or maybe not, he didn't stay hidden for long and was soon terrorising everyone in the room as he roamed around on a chain. That was ok as being tied up he clearly couldn't reach the members of the group. Not so ok was the fact that the chain became a foot longer every five minutes!

The clues and puzzles were a mixture of logical, observation and physical. All were made harder by the fact that there was a zombie in the room with us.

The zombie could move round the floor pretty fast. Sad to say I was the first to get caught and got sent to the quarantine area. Although no longer able to search for clues, I could still offer verbal assistance to the team.

Did we survive? Yes, we managed to find the exit key and escaped the lab in 56 minutes. To be fair, a few of us had become Zombie bait by then. Well done Sharon for being the only member of our team not to get bitten.

No, this wasn't a dream. The attraction is called 'Trapped in a Room with a Zombie' and is a live actor escape room located in Stratford, East London, near to Westfield and the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. It can accommodate groups up to 12 players for each game. Other opportunities to become 'Trapped' are available including a prison van and an MI5 surveillance van. Have a look at www.trappedinaroom.co.uk, if you dare!

Catherine Skeggs - E2715



AGTO Eastern Branch Committee

Joan Hanks - Director and Events Coordinator

Maria Maltby - Secretary

Linda Nicholas - Treasurer

Yvonne Hodson - Web page and Sub Editor

Maureen Hardingham - Telephone Liaison

Co-opted:

Enid Pamment - Acting Chairman

Catherine Skeggs - Vice Chairman

Jackie Ames, Elizabeth Cauldwell and Graham Scrase - Committee Members

Tony Wright - Official Photographer

Kent Branch's Chairman's Message

Our recent Kent Branch meeting and AGM was held in September at the magnificent Battle of Britain Memorial, located at Capel-le Ferne near Folkestone. It was an opportunity to update members on our activities over the last year and to look ahead to 2020.

It's been another active year for the Kent Branch and I thank our committee of Carol, our treasurer, Carol 2 our Secretary, and Eileen, for their continued support. Despite some setbacks to our meeting schedule we held our inaugural week-end away with Warner at Bembridge on the Isle of Wight as well as our Christmas get-together at Penshurst Place.

Sadly the opening of the Mining Museum at Bettshanger remains uncertain and our Boudicca visit, arranged for us by Martin Hay from Go Cruise, didn't quite get enough support. However the meeting at Guildford and Wisley took place with excellent support.

A number of Kent members

attended the AGTO Showcase Weekend in Nottinghamshire in February where we were blessed with Spring-like weather. Next year's Showcase Weekend is in Warwickshire, close to Stratford-upon-Avon, over the weekend of 21 to 23 February.

A great deal of time and effort goes into organising these Showcase Weekends, so with what promises to be some very interesting fam trips around 'Shakespeare Country', and with the usual mix of networking, the Showcase Exhibition, and some great entertainment I want to encourage our members to attend and really raise our attendance level into the high teens or twenties.

The Kent branch remains a key element within the national AGTO organisation with our increasing membership and activity. Both Carols and Kath Brown managed the stand at the Holiday and Leisure Show at the Kent Showground at Detling in March. Carol 1 attended the show at Saint Hill and David Steele mans the stand at most group travel shows.

The AGTO Magazine is now fully established with the 4th edition recently published. We have submitted interesting articles from our members for inclusion and you should see some of these in this issue. But we really need more contributions. They can be a full page, half page, quarter page or just a snippet. And we do need an editor.

Carol 1 and I represented AGTO Kent at the funeral of David Lote from Just for Groups. David was a very active Associate Member and a regular attendee at our meetings.

Looking ahead, and following our successful late autumn break last year we've arranged a similar one for later this month (22nd to 25th) at the Marsham Court Hotel, Bournemouth.

It's been a pleasure to have been the Chairman of our branch for another year and to have met up with new and old members at our various meeting. Thank you.

Jim Silvester K2496

'The Few' at the Battle of Britain Memorial by Jim Silvester

In September members of Kent Branch visited the Battle of Britain Memorial for a tour of the grounds and to hold our AGM.

The Battle of Britain Memorial is a monument to aircrew who flew in the Battle of Britain. It is sited on the White Cliffs at Capel-le-Ferne, near Folkestone.



Our members were greeted by Jules Gomez, who manages the site, who gave us a presentation before taking us on a guided tour. It's a remarkable place, in particular the 'Lone Pilot' memorial and the Memorial Wall with the names of all the pilots - known worldwide as 'The Few'. On behalf of our group I'd like to thank him for the generosity he extended us to us, including a complimentary visit into to the Scramble Experience and the use of the conference room for our lunch and AGM.

Group visits are welcomed at the Memorial. Full details can be found at www.battleofbritainmemorial.org

Jim Silvester K2496

"Do do the Douro" by Jim Silvester

Have you and your group enjoyed a cruise on the Douro River in Portugal? If you haven't then I strongly recommend you put it quickly on your 'to do' list.

I was fortunate to lead twenty-three members of Hartley and District Active Retirement Association on a cruise this July. I'm very pleased to say that the whole trip lived up to all expectations.

The booking was made through Martin Hay of GoCruise (an AGTO Associate member). In planning the trip he found us the 'Douro Splendour' a brand new ship operated by Riviera Travel.

The holiday started in the magnificent city of Porto with a tour around the city's many highlights. We then embarked for our cruise that took us along the Douro to the border with Spain. The journey took us through the Carrapatelo locks, the deepest in Europe with a rise in water of around 35 metres. The scenery is stunning, gently passing through many vineyards owned by all the recognised brand names for Port, stopping at one for dinner and tastings.

The trip included a coach trip to the Spanish city of Salamanca, including lunch with Flamenco dancers. Very well worth the visit.

The Douro is different from other European river cruises in that there are no major places on route. There's also



no night-time sailing as the river is too dangerous to navigate in the dark. What you get in return is a more relaxed daytime sailing experience, undertaken with ample time to soak up the scenery from the sun deck. On this trip the weather was absolutely gorgeous.

As I say, if you haven't done it yet, do do the Douro.

Jim Silvester K2496

Crunch time at Jordans by Carol Gower

Heading home after a holiday in Lincolnshire leading a group from CBA Millennium Outings I had arranged to stop at Jordans Mill in Bedfordshire.

This historical working water mill and gardens, located close to the A1 near Biggleswade and on the banks of the River Ivel, was once one of the most advanced of its time. Over the 20th century Jordans Mill continued innovating, becoming part of the worldwide granola movement in the 1970s and creating the breakfast cereal Jordans Original Crunchy.

Today there are organised tours at 11.30am and 2.30pm. Dwell time is around an hour.

The website www.jordansmill.com will give you all the information you need to know but I can confirm you are in for a good visit. The food is excellent and, as a group of 54, we had a private room for coffee on arrival and later our pre-ordered sandwich lunch.

You can take a very interesting tour of the historic mill and spend time in the lovely gardens. Once again, take

a look at the photos on the website and you'll see just how lovely a spot this is.

I would imagine that groups with limited time would be able to call in for a pre-ordered lunch break only, but I do recommend finding the time to enjoy the full visitor experience.

If you're looking for another reason to visit, it's only four miles from the Shuttleworth Collection and 10 miles from Wrest Park.

Carol Gower K1770

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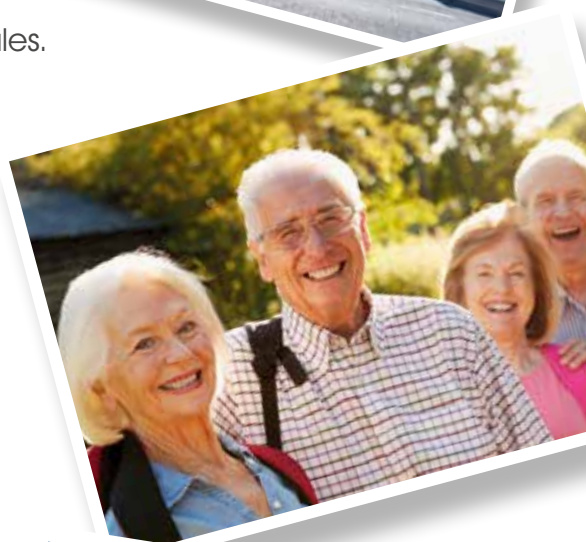
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Discovering a secret Italian gem

by Jim Silvester

One of the undoubted joys of being an AGTO member is the opportunity to take part in the occasional fam trip.

To promote its new tour 'Northern Italy's Best Kept Secrets', award-winning group tour operator Success Tours organised a fam trip to showcase what they describe as a "rural jewel set between the sparkling lakes Como and Iseo, the Imagna Valley is a lush green oasis that remains relatively untouched to tourism".

Our interest aroused, around 30 travellers, including AGTO members and partners from Kent and Southern branches, took an early morning flight from Heathrow to Milan. On arrival we headed north to beautiful Lake Como to experience the delights of the lake and the wonderful towns of Bellagio, and on,

by ferry, to Varenna.

This was the start of a full-on programme over four days that included the unspoilt gems of the Cornabusa Sanctuary (a church within a cave), lunch in a Trattoria of typical local pasta dishes, a visit to the smaller but enchanting Lake Iseo, and a visit to the Cascina Carretto vineyard for a tour and wine tasting.

Our accommodation was the Hotel Miramonti situated high in the hills above the Imagna Valley with stunning views. This family-run hotel is managed by Giampiero, the third generation of his family to do so. On our arrival at the hotel he was there to greet us and make sure we had everything we needed. During the stay, many of us took part in the pasta making and enjoyed a dip in the superb swimming pool and spa.

On our final day, before returning to the airport, we took in the medieval city of Bergamo, taking the historic funicular that has connected the centre of Bergamo with the Upper Town for more than 120 years. Over the three days we had the services of the lovely Barbara, a local guide, whose knowledge of the region, its history and people was unsurpassed.

The Success Tours team of Tony, Jo, Laura, Charlie and Paul were with us throughout the journey, from check-in at Heathrow to being on the coaches and excursions, as well as mixing with all the travellers over lunches and dinners. The perfect template of a 'fam trip'.

Success Tours is an AGTO Associate member and Jo Blair can be contacted on 01225 764205.

Jim Silvester K2496



A vintage day out

by Jim Silvester

When City & Village Tours launched its Big Book of Trips 2019 there was one tour that seems to have caught the eye of more than one AGTO Branch. The 'Vintage Essex' tour, that includes a visit to the garage of family-owned coach *Lodges Coaches*, has proved something of a hit. Jim Silvester recounts the story of the day he led a group into deepest Essex.

Starting our day from Kent the members of Hartley and District Active Retirement Association navigated the Dartford Crossing into Essex without any problems or delays.

In the upper part of the county we picked up our City and Village Tours Blue Badge guide before heading to the pretty village of Thaxted for morning tea and coffee at the pub.

We then took a leisurely stroll through the village visiting the church and Guildhall on the way.



Our journey then took us through the delightful countryside of the Rodings, a group of eight picturesque villages, seeing quaint thatched cottages along the route, before arriving in the little village of High Easter for lunch.

But this wasn't lunch in a country pub or tearoom, this was something very different and really quite special.

Lunch was at the garage of *Lodges Coaches*, a working company with a fleet of modern coaches. What makes this special is that lunch was taken inside an old garage

building that has been turned into a transport museum, complete with vintage charabancs.

These old coaches dating from the 1940s and 1950s have appeared in a number of TV programmes.

After a splendid ploughmen's lunch we then took trips on two vintage coaches into the countryside. The look on the faces of many of the group as we stepped aboard were priceless. If you're doing this trip, keep the ride a secret. It will be a great surprise!

Jim Silvester - K2496



Out and About with Jim

Jim Silvester, Chairman of the Kent Branch, and group travel organiser with Hartley and District Active Retirement Group (HADARA) offers a few thoughts about things to see and things to do that will appeal to groups

Studley Castle in Warwickshire is Warner Leisure Hotels' newest member of its family. There are modern accommodation wings but these retain the ambiance of the historic castle. Quirky fun objects adorn the public areas. The whole range of Warwickshire attractions are a short drive away. Food and entertainment were excellent, including a superb female Motown singer who had the dance floor full. Thank you to Sarah Goldsbrough, Warner's National Sales Manager, Groups, who gave us a tour and a welcome cup of tea.

We enjoyed a race day at Kempton Park Racecourse with 35 members. Some came back with less money than they went with, but it was an enjoyable trip.

Our annual fun putting competition at Redlibbets Golf and Country Club near Sevenoaks generated a high attendance of 80 members who clearly enjoyed lunch, the putting, and tea and cakes.

In September we visited the Bolney Wine Estate in Sussex. A tour of the vineyard, wine tasting and lunch was followed by an overnight stay at the nearby 'The Eight Bells', a 4-star rated bed and breakfast, and pub. The next day we enjoyed a ride on the historic Bluebell Railway, riding behind a steam locomotive along the 11-mile line that runs between Sheffield Park and Horsted Keynes.

If you follow the news about West End musicals you'll have seen the very positive reviews for 'Come from Away'. Playing at the Phoenix Theatre in Charing Cross

Road, this moving show tells the story of what happened when, in the direct aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, 38 planes were ordered to land unexpectedly in the small town of Gander in the province of Newfoundland, Canada. The characters in the musical are based on (and in most cases share the names of) real Gander residents as well as some of the 7,000 stranded travellers they housed and fed. We went on the 11th September, the anniversary, to a packed audience and a well-deserved standing ovation.

A rare disappointment when we went to 'Priscilla Queen of the Desert' at the Orchard Theatre in Dartford. It's a new production by Jason Donovan of this highly acclaimed and hilarious show. Sadly Joe McFadden is totally miscast!

At the AGTO Showcase Weekend in Nottinghamshire in February we won a trip to see Cutty Sark in Greenwich, courtesy of Royal Museums Greenwich, an AGTO Associate member. We enjoyed a delightful cream tea and a look around the famous tea clipper. It's a magnificent attractions and well worth a group trip there.

More than 50 members enjoyed a day trip to Oxford on a tour organised by City & Village Tours. The tour takes in the sights of Oxford, including one of the Colleges, followed by a boat trip to a country pub.

Jim Silvester K2496

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AGTO Kent Branch Committee

- Jim Silvester** - Chairman
- Carol Gower** - Treasurer
- Carol Blackmore** - Secretary
- Eileen Booker and Kath Brown** - Committee Member
- David Steele** - Board Director

Northern Branch's Chairman's Message

As I write this we're very much looking forward to our Lancashire familiarisation visit in November staying at the Mercure Preston Samlesbury Hotel. The weekend offers such a good and varied programme, so we're sure to have the opportunity to purchase a few Christmas presents. It's also an opportunity to enjoy some quality time with our members. Equally importantly, we're all looking forward to learning more about the area's many attractions and getting some ideas for trips in 2020 and 2021.

From a membership point of view there's not a lot of change in our numbers. We have a full committee now and we continue to have regular and lively meetings. It's good to note that we aren't short of suggestions and ideas. It's finding new members that's more of a challenge. I'm therefore looking forward to the new Northern Travel and Tourism Show taking place at The Monastery in Manchester on 25 February, organised by GTO magazine and supported by Marketing Manchester and Greatdays Group Travel. We'll be there to talk with visiting GTOs, and encourage those who aren't AGTO

members to consider joining. In the meantime, if you know of any GTOs, whether you're a GTO or Associate member, who you feel may benefit from AGTO membership, then please let me know and we'll do the rest.

Our committee continue to work very hard. Pam Wharton is very busy working to get the best deals for her groups and she is always happy to offer you some inspiration and a quote. For more information or assistance, please contact her on 01706 648126 or email p.wharton@ellensmith.co.uk. We should be supporting our Associate members as much as they support us organisers with discounts.

Bob Walker generally promotes the longer haul holidays very successfully. From time to time we receive feedback from members on their group trips and holidays. One of the benefits of being an AGTO member is being able to hear about the experiences of others. Hazel Jones has written a lovely report on her recent holiday to Croatia. Elsewhere in the pages of this magazine you'll read what members of other AGTO

branches have been doing, to learn from others. But we need more. If you've had a successful trip, or not, then please send us details.

I'm now busy booking pantos, and have recently enjoyed a group visit to Blackpool to the Viva Blackpool venue. After an excellent carvery lunch we were entertained by a Vegas-style cabaret show. The venue is located close to the Tower and the Promenade and there was time for some shopping in the excellent shopping centre. It was rather windy and wet so it was a brisk walk along the prom and onto the bus for an illumination tour and home.

Viva Blackpool has regular matinee and evening shows throughout the year, some themed, offering great group discounts. For our Northern Branch members, Pam would be more than happy to quote you for show only, coach and show, or coach, show and accommodation.

May I wish all AGTO members a very Happy Christmas and new year.

Jenny Robinson N1139

Croatia's Venetian and Roman influences by Hazel Jones

In September I had the pleasure of travelling with a small group to the Istrian peninsula in Croatia. The area is becoming increasingly popular with UK holidaymakers, sitting on the Adriatic coast in the north west of the country.

Arriving at Pula's small airport we were met by our representative who directed us to our coach. Half an hour later we arrived in the small town of Medulin and checked into our hotel, the Park Plaza



Belvedere, our home for the next two weeks.

The hotel is operated by Arena Hotels, part of the PPHE hotel group, Radisson hotel group's exclusive partner for its wholly owned Park Plaza brand in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. The Park Plaza brand is a new identity being rolled out by Radisson.

Our rooms were lovely with all the first-class facilities we've come to expect from Radisson. We all had balconies overlooking the swimming pool and with views over the sparkling blue sea. Meals were all self-service and catered for every taste.

Medulin is located at the southern tip of the Istrian peninsula. The quiet town sits around a harbour and has a lovely sandy beach on a shallow bay protected by a sand bank for safe swimming. Boat trips and water sports are available for those who want them.

There's a real choice of coach tours around the region and we spent some time deciding on our itinerary.

The area is full of interesting and varied architecture. It has been ruled by the Romans, Byzantines, Venetians, French Napoleon, the Hapsburgs to 1914 and Italy to 1947. It then became part of Yugoslavia until 1991 when Croatia became an independent country. Most road signs and place names are in Italian as well as Croatian which makes translation and pronunciation easier.

On our second day we decided to explore the city of Pula. Taking the local bus into the centre, we alighted by the magnificent Roman Amphitheater. It is very well preserved with the outer walls almost intact and rivals the one in Rome. There are regular stage re-enactments of gladiator tournaments, fortunately without the killing! Pula also has a Roman temple dedicated to Augustus and an archway called the 'Golden Gate' leading from Portorata Square into the main shopping street. There are plenty of shops, bars and cafes. Just inside the Golden Gate is a café featuring a bronze statue of the novelist, writer and poet James Joyce showing him seated on the veranda.

Our next excursion was to a small walled village called Bale (Valle in Italian). It is perched high on a hilltop with steep narrow streets that were designed to help repel invaders. During the time of the Venetians, a famous visitor was Giacomo Casanova who came to the village to court a local lady.

Our next stop was Rovinj on the Adriatic coast. This is a lovely town full of Venetian architecture. It has a bell tower reminiscent of St Marks in Venice. The waterfront and streets were lively and lined with market stalls selling



local produce. After wandering around the town, we boarded the coach to travel to a hilltop agro-tourism farm, near Grzini, for lunch. Our appetizer was the local

Teranino brandy, followed by a typical vegetable and bean soup. The main course was pasta with lamb and a homemade spaghetti with sauce. The whole meal was accompanied by copious amounts of wine, both red and white. Delicious!

Next stop was Porec, said to be one of the most popular tourist destinations in Croatia.

The town's long history dates back to Roman times and has a typical roman layout of two main streets at right angles. We strolled along the streets lined with cafes and bars. In the historic old town, the 6th century Euphrasian Basilica complex is famous for its gem-studded Byzantine mosaics. The coastline here draws visitors with camping areas, marinas and water sports.

Our next trip was to Motovun, a small fortified hilltop town where the speciality is black and white truffles. The old town gate is Roman with a Roman Loggia just outside where people could shelter if they were locked out after the curfew. The famous racing driver, Mario Andretti was born here in 1944. After tasting wine and truffles we proceeded to Bizet for brandy tasting. Yes, it was a very alcoholic trip!

Another trip took us to Piran and Portoroz, two coastal towns in Slovenia. The very western end of Slovenia reaches down to the Adriatic between Croatia and Italy. We needed passports and euros for this. Piran is another very old town with city walls and narrow winding alleyways. It also has a Venetian clock tower. We sat in the main square and had lunch near to a statue of Giuseppe Tartini, a native of the town, who in the 18th century became one of the world's most famous violinists.

After lunch, we proceeded the short distance to Portoroz. This is a very grand looking spa town reminiscent of the Hapsburg era. The wide promenade circles the bay lined with yachts and dinghies. The area produces salt, olive oil and Malvazia white wine.

Croatia and Slovenia in September really is an ideal time to travel. The weather is good and the summer crowds have long disappeared. Altogether a very interesting and relaxing holiday.

Hazel Jones N2039





Another Cheshire hidden gem by Ray Howarth

Set in the north Cheshire countryside, a few miles of south of Warrington, and close to the junction of the M6 and M56, is the little known Grappenhall Heys Walled Garden.

Once the home of the wealthy banker Thomas Parr around the year 1830, the property had a turbulent period of demise and was left to a friends' group, together with the local parish councils, to apply for a lottery grant to bring it back to its former glory. Those works have now been completed to create a beautiful, peaceful garden.

It's interesting to note that Grappenhall and Thelwall parish

councils paid for a gardener to look after Grappenhall Heys. However, in providing the funding there was a condition attached. To encourage the public to visit there should be no charge.

Today the Pleasure Garden, Kitchen Garden and Victorian Glasshouses provide a beautiful relaxing setting throughout the whole year. The Fountain Room Café serves good quality food and there is good access for the disabled. The garden is open on Tuesday to Sunday but note the café is only open on Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

Allow between one-and-a-half to

two hours for a visit including the café. This is an ideal attraction that is likely to appeal to groups looking to add somewhere new into their itineraries. It could be combined with nearby Arley Hall & Gardens, Tatton Park, Dunham Massey Park, Norton Priory or Knutsford. However, there is an important point to note. Access for a full-size coach is all but impossible, so this is an attraction for a small group travelling by minibus or by cars. Have a look at the website to see more about the history, facilities and opening times - www.ghwalledgarden.org.uk

Ray Howarth - N1284

AGTO Northern Branch Committee

Jenny Robinson - Chairman

Avril Redfern - Treasurer

Pam Wharton - Secretary

John Flynn, Bob Walker, Ray Howarth and Hazel Jones - Committee Members

Southern Branch's Chairman's Message

I'm very proud to be able represent Southern Branch as Chairman again for a further year.

Our AGM was held at Arundel Wildfowl and Wetlands Centre. This is a lovely venue and proved ideal for our meeting. Afterwards we enjoyed a guided walk around the centre to see a huge number of unusual ducks and birds in a very attractive Lakeland setting. Thank you WWT!

Some of our members were also impressed by how much else Arundel

has to offer, including, of course, its magnificent restored medieval castle and stately home.

Jackie Ring, our Branch Secretary, and I attended the Group Leisure & Travel Awards evening at MK Stadium, Milton Keynes, followed by the magazine's trade show the following day. Both events were enjoyable and very informative. The trade show is a large one and it certainly takes a while to visit all the stands of particular interest!

As a Branch we are now researching possible venues of interest to our members where we can hold our meetings next year.

As I write this our members are looking forward to our three-day stay at Warners, Cricket St. Thomas. We've had an excellent response so I hope everyone has an enjoyable weekend. Meanwhile, may I wish all readers best wishes for your future group plans.

Sue Povey - S1972

Kynren – What an experience! What a spectacle! by Jackie Ring

Our groups are always asking for us to organise something new, something different, a new experience. Well, what an experience this proved to be!

In early September I attended an educational weekend organised by Just for Groups! The team there had been saying for some time that the Kynren show in north east England is something worth seeing.

The site is in Bishop Auckland, County Durham, an area steeped in hundreds of years of history. It is described as "An Epic Tale of England, an open-air live show, performed by a cast of thousands". It actually was, with 1,500 volunteers, sheep, horses, geese and various children. Together they enacted scenes from our nation's history, from Boudicca and the invasion of the Romans, through the Tudors and the Civil War, the coming of the Industrial Age and local mining, the moving scene of the WW1 Christmas football game, and up to almost the present day and England's 1966 Football World Cup win. This was accompanied by a narrative, music, gunshots and of course celebratory fireworks as a grand finale.

Before the performance we were treated to a 'meet and greet' with a few of the most important performers, the white Percheron horses in their stalls. We were told how this breed is very suited to performing the different scenes which include jousting as well as cart-pulling. The horses are very intelligent and can associate a certain



costume and music to a relevant scene, knowing what's expected of them.

We were pleased also to meet the organisers afterwards



who explained how Kynren came into being, from an idea based on a similar event in France, and the London 2012 Olympics opening ceremony. A visit around a Viking Village and the opportunity to see the other animals beforehand set the scene for everyone.

Although this was the highlight of the trip, Just for Groups had put together an interesting and varied itinerary so we could visit other places in the area, and see for ourselves that there would be plenty to do depending on the interests of our group. We spent the most part of a day in Beamish, the Living Museum of the North. This open air museum tells the recent history of life in north east England up to the 1940s with shops, a bank, cottages, workshops, farm, a colliery and pit village, and a fish and chip shop where they still use dripping (younger readers may have to Google what this is). In the hardware shop a few of us re-enacted the famous 'Four Candles' sketch from The Two Ronnies!

The site and the museum's vehicles had recently been used for the filming of Downton Abbey and it was interesting to recognise some of these. More buildings are being added on the site, including a 1950s Welfare Hall (where babies could be weighed – and 'oh, we used to have one of those' could often be heard).

Although spread over a large site, it's easy to get around by taking one of the regular trams to the different locations. The group can also wander around in their own time and speed, looking at whatever interests them.

On the Sunday we visited the Auckland Project in Bishop Auckland which includes a number of sites. One

is Auckland Castle, the home of the Prince Bishops of Durham, where a large restoration plan is nearing completion. Each room will be set during a different period to show how the individual Prince Bishops lived there. The other sites there include the ultra-modern Auckland Tower with viewing platform. This received mixed views from our group on how well it fits in with the old buildings in the town. Nearby the Mining Art Gallery displays artwork and artefacts by miners.

An afternoon visit to Durham and its stunning cathedral followed. We were given a guided tour, which is always worth it as it brings a place to life, as well as being given a history of the cathedral and Christianity in the area. We were also shown some of the cathedral's most important artefacts, including the glorious stained glass windows and the tomb of the Venerable Bede. A new exhibition 'Open Treasure', housed in the Monks' Dormitory, displays significant artefacts from the cathedral's long history.

Our hotel for the weekend was the Holiday Inn Darlington A1 Scotch Corner (now there's a name!), which treated us well and put on an evening's entertainment. The hotel is well placed for the A1M motorway and getting around. But Just for Groups has a selection of hotels in the area which it can, depending on the requirements of your group.

I'd like to express my thanks to all the venues for hosting us and making us feel so welcome – and also to Harold Burke and the rest of his team at Just for Groups! for organising everything. Do contact the company for more information. Call 01603 886740 or email harold.burke@theukholidaygroup.com

Jackie Ring S2221



Hidden treasure in East Sussex

by Richard Moore

In August I took 30 of my Stages members to Michelham Priory in Hailsham in East Sussex. .

What a wonderful day out we had. After a lovely ride through the East Sussex countryside we arrived at this wonderful location, a beautiful old Priory surrounded by stunning gardens and country views. We had tea and biscuits on arrival in the courtyard Café, where they

serve light lunches and all types of sandwiches and home-made cakes.

We had arranged a guided house tour with an excellent guide David who brought the house to life with his knowledge and humour. We all then had lunch in the café which was very well prepared and served by very efficient staff.

After lunch we had free time to revisit

the house and wander the estate, and feed the large amount of ducks wandering the estate.

All of my group said what a wonderful day out we had and would like to go back again.

For more information got to www.sussexpast.co.uk or call 01323 844224.

Richard Moore – S2167



Soho scandals and sleaze!

by Pat Lake

24 members of the Southern Branch joined members from across the country for a delightful walking tour through Soho in central London. The tour was organised by City and Village Tours and used the new Vox Wireless Tour Guide System. We were all given lightweight headphones through which we could hear the commentary. This isn't a taped system, but live commentary from one of City & Village Tours' top notch Blue Badge Guides. It means that those on the tour don't have to gather close to the guide in order to hear what's being said. It's a great idea and everyone on this extremely interesting tour agreed that the Vox system gave perfect

clarity despite the noise of London around you.

The tour took us through present day Soho and we were immersed in the glamour, scandals and sleaze that has made the area of London famous world-wide. Our tour guide took us as far back to the 1600s with many amusing stories from that time to the present day.

City and Village Tours has a wide range of walks that use the Vox system. To find out more go to www.cityandvillage.com

Pat Lake S2528

Perspective on Switzerland

by Sue Povey

Earlier this year I took a group of 20 to Switzerland. The itinerary was organised through Switzerland Travel Centre, an AGTO Associate member, with whom I've booked a group before.

The promotional material for Switzerland always makes the point that you can see the country by plane, trains, boats and an assortment of other mountain transport. Travellers undertaking this should not think of it as a journey but as a truly awesome experience of efficient travelling and spectacular views. There's no luggage to worry about as that is transported direct from airport to hotel. We took a stop for a city tour and lunch in Lucerne en route to add a very pleasurable break.

Although my group were all seniors, no one had any difficulty with the trains and they were hugely impressed by the cleanliness, comfort and efficiency.

We were based in the lovely mountain village of Wengen in the Bernese Oberland, staying at the Sunstar Hotel on half board. This is a base I rate highly due to its location and very good hotels. Not only is

it a beautiful and peaceful car free village, but it also allows for diverse days out in different directions.

As an example of contrasts, during our week's stay, our group took the cog railway up the Schynige Platte to see the Alpine Garden and hear the Alpine horn players. We took a tour of Thun to see its medieval centre and castle and returned by a lazy and scenic lake cruise. We took the train to visit Spiez and its lakeside vineyards and castle, not forgetting the wine tasting. We also had other scenic visits in the mountains with gentle walks.

The great advantage of this destination is that a Regional Pass Ticket for the Bernese Oberland railway can be included in the tour which allows almost unlimited travel by all modes of transport within the region, whether lake steamer, trains (normal, narrow gauge, mountain or cog!), buses, cable cars etc) so there's nothing further to pay. This allows for great days out and plenty of freedom on the free days to either enjoy a lazy day on the lakes or a more adventurous one with a mountain hike from one higher viewpoint to another with no uphill slog!



For more information, go to www.switzerlandtravelcentre.co.uk

Sue Povey S1972

AGTO Southern Branch Committee

Sue Povey - Chairman

Anne Barnes - Treasurer

Jackie Ring - Secretary

Pat Lake, Sylvia Adams - Committee Members

Western Branch's Chairman's Message

Firstly I'd like to reflect that we have lost three stalwart members since the last AGM: Wilfred (Wilf) Williams, Dave Tysall and David Lote. They will all be sadly missed.

Our Branch AGM held in Salisbury was attended by what I might describe as our usual faithful stalwarts plus two new members. Thank you to everyone who participated in one way or another, but we were only just quorate. I think we're in the same position as many Branches in wondering how we can attract more Branch members to our various events.

However, let me mention two events that I hope our Western Branch members will put in their diaries, and that other readers will want to consider.

The first is the South West Group Travel Show. This takes place on Thursday 30 January at 'We The Curious' in Bristol. This is the harbourside interactive science museum and popular visitor attraction previously known as At-Bristol.

We're looking for members of the Western Branch to help staff the

AGTO stand at the show. All you'll be asked to do is engage with visitors as they wander through the exhibition, highlight the benefits of AGTO membership, and encourage them to join the Association. Just 30 minutes of your time will really help so please consider joining me on the day. The other advantage of coming along is to see what our AGTO Associates, many of whom will be exhibiting, have to offer your group.

The second event that I'm keen for Western Branch members to attend is the 2020 AGTO Showcase Weekend. This takes place over the weekend of 21 to 23 February at Ettington Chase hotel near Stratford-upon-Avon. The itinerary for the weekend includes the national AGM and Western Branch Spring Meeting. As in previous years the Showcase Weekend features a trade show, the 'Showcase', where Associate members will have information and all sorts of attractive propositions for your group. In addition there will be fam visits by coach across Shakespeare's Country, a networking dinner on the Friday and a Gala dinner on the Saturday. If the 2019 AGTO Showcase Weekend in Nottinghamshire earlier this year is

anything to go by you'll be amazed at the options on offer to keep you busy for the whole three days. Full details are on the website.

Finally, on 20 June we have our Western Branch summer fam trip. This time it's to Chavenage, near Tetbury in Gloucestershire. Chavenage is a wonderful Elizabethan House that has been used as a location for many TV shows and films, including Lark Rise to Candleford, The House of Eliott and Poldark. For those of you who watch Poldark, you will know it better as Trenwith House. Western Branch has arranged with Caroline the manager of Chavenage, and elder daughter of the owners, for a guided tour followed by a buffet lunch. Joanna, Caroline's younger sister, runs the in-house catering and is arranging a buffet lunch. The tour gives you details of the history of the house and the two families that have lived at Chavenage since the reign of Elizabeth I.

On behalf of the Western Branch committee I look forward to seeing you at one of our events very soon.

Roger Sims W2388



Day Trip to Brixham and Coleton Fishacre by June Coleman

As we head towards the winter months it's a good opportunity to look back to the summer and the trip our retirement group took to Brixham and the nearby

National Trust property, Coleton Fishacre.

We arrived in Brixham in time for a well-earned coffee. The harbour itself is a bustling working area and there were also plenty of tourists, being the school holidays. With plenty of places to eat, we enjoyed local fish and chips and ice cream, the sunshine and the Devon air.

In the afternoon we braved the narrow country lanes around Kingswear to visit Coleton Fishacre, the family home of the D'Oyly Carte family, now owned, since 1982, by the National Trust.

This is a real treat to explore. It's in 1920s art deco style, with beautiful sea views and complete with a Bluthner piano in the saloon, reminiscent of the Jazz Age. The gardens are stunning and lovingly maintained, and there's a walk down to the coastal paths for the energetic.



A great day was had by all and it didn't rain, as was forecast, so we were very lucky.

June Coleman W1888

Lake District and Laurel and Hardy by Lis Bird

This holiday, for the Yatton Outing Club, was originally an idea from our late and much-missed 'leader' Dave Tysall who, together with the late David Lote (Just for Groups) had initiated the outline of the trip. Our new Committee proceeded with this, feeling our way, and helped firstly by David Lote and then, by Pamela Edwards and the team at Just for Groups. It has very much been a learning curve, and there were several hiccups along the way. However, on Sunday 7 July, 40 of our members set off by Mainline coach from Yatton to the Lakes led by Brenda, Keith, Mike and Vera.

The group was heading for the Holiday Inn Lancaster, stopping off for a very interesting visit to Tatton Park (NT) on the way before settling into the hotel with dinner and a quiet evening to relax.

On the Monday, first stop was Bowness-on-Windermere for a 90 minute cruise with Windermere Lake Cruises. After lunch it was



back on board the coach to travel to Cockermouth to visit Wordsworth House and Garden, another National Trust property. Back at the hotel the group enjoyed a quiz prepared the previous year by Dave Tysall.

Tuesday saw the group heading

to Waterhead, near Ambleside, to board three Mountain Goat minibuses. In convoy the minibuses took the group on a Lakes adventure, visiting the mountain passes of the Western Fells, Wrynose Pass, Duddon Valley and Hardknott Pass. The group saw the Roman Fort as they descended into Eskdale for a ride on L'al Ratty, the local name for the Ravenglass & Eskdale Railway. The itinerary included a visit to Wastwater and Muncaster Castle Garden & Owl Sanctuary. Despite the low cloud and mist obscuring some of the views in the high mountains a brilliant day was had by all. In the evening, a beetle drive back at the hotel proved to be really rather competitive!

Another National Trust property beckoned on the Wednesday with a visit to Sizergh Castle (NT) near Kendal. A look at the gardens was followed by a visit to the castle itself when it opened at midday. After lunch in Coniston they left to have lunch at Coniston the coach took the



group to Ulverston for a visit to the famous Laurel and Hardy Museum.

After a very busy, interesting and entertaining few days the group said goodbye to the hotel and headed for

home, but not before a surprise visit to Bakewell for lunch and a look round this famous Derbyshire market town.

Thanks must be given to the team at Just for Groups who have been

such a support, to Kristoff the coach driver, and to Mainline for the very comfortable coach. We are already planning for next year.

Lis Bird W2793

Lille revisited by Gill Brooker

Almost every report in these pages is a positive one. But sometimes, things don't turn out quite as expected. Gill Brooker takes up the story.

Many years ago I took a group to Lille in northern France. It was an absolutely freezing weekend with the wind whistling around the tall dark buildings. It wasn't pleasant. We also had an issue with our coach driver at the time but that's another story.

So, it was with trepidation that I returned to Lille earlier this year. The weather was fine, the restaurants were good, the shops were great. It really is a delightful city.

However, during the Saturday afternoon of our visit the streets were suddenly cordoned off, there were police everywhere, and members of the French 'Yellow Vests' movement (the Mouvement des gilets jaunes) wearing their trademark yellow hi-viz jackets came marching through the streets. Those members of our group who were the wrong side of the cordons couldn't get back to the hotel. Others said they actually enjoyed seeing the tear gas being thrown and batons raised, from a distance!

I, for one, being on the 'right' side of the cordon, went back to the safety of the hotel. The receptionists were very blasé about it. It seems it was happening every week!

So, would I return to Lille? There's no doubt it's a lovely city, but for me, no thank you! However, my group



seemed to enjoy the excitement and I'm sure it will live in their memories!

Gill Brooker W1198

Llamas at Glyndwr Vineyard

by Heather Taylor

Earlier this year four of the Wales & Midlands Travel Club committee went on a recce, looking for something a bit different for a day trip for our group.

We always look for somewhere with lovely food, but this time, instead of a house we were heading for a vineyard, clearly expecting vines and wines. What we were not expecting was to meet some llamas and sheep.

Glyndwr Vineyard is the oldest and largest established family vineyard in Wales. It lies to the west of Llanblethian, south of Cowbridge in the Vale of Glamorgan.

When we advertised the trip nobody, not even some of the people who come on the trips who live within a few miles of it, had heard of it!

The current owners pioneered the revival of viticulture in Wales, establishing Glyndwr Vineyard in 1979. There are two generations working at the vineyard. We met Joe (one of the sons) and had quite a chat. He went through all they could provide and do on the day.

Glyndwr Vineyard not only produces its own wines, but

also Welsh Brandy from its own grapes and a unique and delicious cider.

The cost of the visit is £38 per person. This includes a glass of sparkling white or rose wine on arrival, followed by an introduction and a vineyard tour, where you will meet the llamas, sheep and other farm animals. After the tour we had a freshly prepared buffet, made from mostly local produce, followed by dessert. Two further glasses of wine (of your choice) were served with the meal.

Lots of boxes came back to Cardiff on the coach, all full of wines, brandies, cider and many other items which can be bought at the Vineyard. As usual Gareth came with the coach from Mainline Coaches. As normal he did a great job, sticking to the elderflower cordial with water. All the boxes & bottles arrived back in Cardiff in one piece!

Our thanks go to everyone at Glyndwr Vineyard for such an enjoyable visit. Now the search is on for our next trip.

For more information, go to www.glyndwrvineyard.co.uk

Heather Taylor W1008



A Thank you Trip

First class travel for Phil and Heather Taylor on board 'The Dalesman', the steam-hauled train excursion on the Settle-Carlisle railway line. The tickets were a gift to Phil from

the Western Branch following his retirement as Chairman to say thank you for the many hours he devoted to the Branch and to AGTO.



In at the deep end in Poole

by Rosemary Robbins

27 members and friends from the Minchinhampton Branch of the Royal British Legion enjoyed a splendid trip to Poole in Dorset to visit the headquarters of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and the Lifeboat College National Training Centre.

On arrival, we were divided into two groups for our tour. The building is impressive, nautical in design and including two restaurants and a bar, all having superb panoramic views of the bay. The College is residential with 60 bedrooms, a lecture theatre and conference rooms.

But most impressive of all were the training facilities. The lifeboats used for training are never painted in the distinctive RNLI colours (so as not to alarm the public in case something goes awry!) but in a very conservative navy and grey, rather like the Royal Navy.

The actual Sea Survival Centre within the building is a 25 x 12.5 x 4m deep wave pool which can be

programmed to replicate various weather and lighting conditions such as high winds, turbulent seas, thunder and lightning and complete darkness. One of the fundamental training exercises is responding to the boat capsizing. This involves the trainees having to jump into the water from a height, board one of the capsized vessel's life rafts, then activate the mechanism which turns the boat over to its correct position.

We heard about the various classes of lifeboat, all of which are now built on site. This has obvious financial advantages as well as enabling technological advances to be easily incorporated. The guides' explanations were technical enough to satisfy the really mechanically minded members of the groups without losing the keen interest of the majority.

We saw videos of RNLI training communities set up in Asia and Africa to instruct local people in

water safety, including ways in which they could improvise everyday objects to that end. This is an aspect of the RNLI which few of us had previously been aware but of huge importance in parts of the world subject to serious flash flooding.

Finally, we were invited to enter a Full Mission Lifeboat Simulator. Video technology made everyone immediately forget we were actually in a static room not on board a lifeboat pitching and rolling in heavy seas whilst looking for survivors. One or two members admitted to feeling slightly seasick whilst a couple walked down the corridor afterwards with a distinctive sea roll!

After a good lunch in the restaurant and a visit to the shop we were on our way home. It was a superbly organized trip and certainly one I could recommend. In fact, I already have!

Rosemary Robbins





Salisbury and Sir Edward by Helen Sims

daughter Yulia Skripal, took place on 4th March 2018 with a Novichok nerve agent. This was of great interest to our GTOs because it was due to this incident that the familiarisation tour was taking place. Salisbury suffered a huge loss in tourism and visitors during the year following the incident and it was good to see at first hand that trade and tourism were picking up again. We ended our guided tour at the Cathedral Green and thanked Georgina for her informative tour.

Many of the GTOs then visited Arundells, the former home of Prime Minister Edward Heath. A very interesting hour was spent wandering through the house and for many of us reliving a history which we could remember. Sir Edward's love of sailing, music, cartoons and Chinese art, as well as his leadership of the country were very much in evidence. Each room in the house had a volunteer guide ready to point out special treasures and tell amusing anecdotes. We were even offered a chance to play his beautiful Steinway piano.

By 2.30pm we had checked into the Best Western Red Lion Hotel and the AGM and Branch meeting commenced at 3pm. When business concluded, four couples stayed on for dinner, bed and breakfast. The hotel staff made us very welcome, however we made a swift departure the next morning as it was Salisbury Half Marathon and they were about to close the roads!

Many thanks must go to Visit Wiltshire, in particular to Flo Wallace, who organised the accommodation and meals, arranged for the tour guide and obtained free access for our group to variously visit Arundells, Mompesson House and the Rifles Wiltshire and Berkshire Museum which all surround the Cathedral grounds.

In 2020, do consider a visit to Salisbury.

Helen Sims W2150

Gathering outside Salisbury's Tourist Information Centre on a Saturday morning at the end of September 10 GTOs began a guided walk around the historic city centre. Georgina Haynes, our Salisbury City Guide, engaged our attention with a brief introduction to the creation of the city of Salisbury in 1220 which followed the move down from the hilltop settlement at Old Sarum to the plains. The aptly named 'Five Rivers Leisure Centre' reflects that Salisbury is at the confluence of the rivers Avon, Nadder, Ebbel, Wylde and Bourne.

Walking through the traditional Saturday market we saw the spot where Henry Stafford, 2nd Duke of Buckingham was executed following his uprising against Richard III. We also saw architectural buildings of the 14th, 15th and 16th century and historic structures which are now completely overlooked by passers-by as they go about their day in the modern shopping complexes. We noted the photo of a sheep above a doorway of an original wool traders shop.

Also pointed out was Zizzi's restaurant and the location of the bench, now removed, where the poisoning of Sergei Skripal, a former Russian military officer and double agent for the UK's intelligence services, and his

AGTO Western Branch Committee

Roger Sims - Chairman

Martin Gibson - Treasurer

Gill Brooker - Secretary

Helen Sims and June Coleman - Committee Members

Andrew Holmes (Norman Allen Group Travel)

Martin Hay (Go Cruise - First 4 Groups) - Co-opted Associate Members

Member fam trips. A real benefit of membership!

In each issue of the AGTO Magazine we bring you details of familiarisation trips organised for GTO members by Associate members. These day trips or short breaks offer a first-class opportunity for you to find out more about a part of the country you may not know, giving you first-hand information that will help enthuse and inspire you to visit with your group.

Our Associate members put a lot of time into organising these trips. One recent trip, organised by Harold Burke and his team at just for groups! and including Kynren and Beamish in north east England, has generated two glowing reports in our Branch news section of this issue.

So, keep your eyes open for news of fam trips, and do try to support them if you can. They really are one of the real benefits of AGTO membership.



THE VIEW FROM THE SHARD

Date: Any February or March

Time: 3pm

Description: The view from The Shard, Guided Tour, Glass of Champagne, unlimited dwell time at the top.

Contact: Kirsty Linton, Trade & Group Sales Manager
e: Kirsty.linton@theviewfromtheshard.com
t: 07717 862509



INDUS EXPERIENCES

Date: FAM trips for 2020

Description: Indus Experiences will be celebrating its 25th birthday in 2020. To mark this special occasion, we are offering some breathtaking familiarisation tours to group travel organisers to the destinations we operate in South and South East Asia for 2020 travel.

Contact: Sheena Raichura, Sales Executive
e: sheena@indusxperiences.co.uk
t: 020 8901 7320
w: www.indusxperiences.co.uk



WARNING! – email scam alert

We all like to think we can spot an email scam. But sometimes those scams are extremely believable. We hear of a GTO who made a booking with a tour operator. When the confirmation email arrived asking the GTO to pay the balance there was no indication that anything was wrong. BUT, that email had been intercepted by a scammer.

The account details weren't those of the tour operator but of the scammer. The GTO paid the balance (around £9,000) and thought nothing more of it. It was only when the tour operator got in touch to chase payment that the GTO realised what had happened. Fortunately, the bank was sympathetic to the situation and the GTO had the money refunded.

You might wonder how an email can be intercepted in this way, as did we. It's unclear. What is clear though is the need to be vigilant with all online transactions, whether it's via email or on a website. When you're paying money, take a moment to reassure yourself that the money is going to the correct place. If in doubt, or in any case, call the tour operator to check. It could be time well spent.



Photo credits for this issue: Aaron Burden, unsplash; WBT-AnibalTrejo; Annie Spratt, unsplash; Neil Fedorowycz, unsplash; View from the Shard, AGTO; Stuart Render; Branch members.



WHERE EXTRAORDINARY HAPPENS



SHEARINGS HOLIDAYS



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.....

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01202 027559

martinhay@gocruise.co.uk

for your peace of mind



Theatre Tip

GTO Carlie Newman reports on the RSC's new touring production of three of Shakespeare's most popular plays.

The new year looks set to bring us a number of touring productions of really good West End shows. However, it's not just the West End tempting us with a night out, or a matinee, at our local theatre. The RSC, the Royal Shakespeare Company, is presenting three of Shakespeare's most popular plays: 'As You Like It', 'Measure for Measure' and 'The Taming of the Shrew' at five venues across England at the start of 2020: Canterbury; Plymouth; Nottingham, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Blackpool.

I was fortunate to see 'As You Like It' at London's Barbican Theatre, directed by Kimberley Sykes. A simple set allows easy change from the court of Duke Frederick (played by Antony Byrne, who also takes the part of his brother who he usurped, the exiled Duke Senior), to the Forest of Arden.

The meeting of Orlando (David Ajao) and Rosalind (Lucy Phelps) is very well done. As they lay eyes upon each other they immediately fall in love, truly love at first sight. Their courtship is not the usual kind. For a start, both have to leave the homes where they have grown up. Duke Frederick banishes Rosalind who goes to the Forest of Arden where her father, Duke Senior, now lives with his loyal band of followers. She is accompanied by her devoted cousin Celia (Sophie Khan Levy) and the two disguise themselves as country folk. Rosalind becomes a young lad called Ganymede and Celia his sister, Aliana.

Orlando is also forced to flee from his unkind brother, Oliver (Leo Wan). He, of course, also ends up in the Forest of Arden, accompanied by his servant, the elderly Adam (a good performance here by Richard Clews).

Rosalind finds out that Orlando is in the forest when she comes across notes on the trees extolling the virtues of



beautiful Rosalind.

There are some delightful scenes when Rosalind, disguised as Ganymede, pretends to be Orlando's love, Rosalind (I hope you are keeping up). Sub plots deal with the relationships between the country folk resident in the Forest. These include a deaf actress, Charlotte Arrowsmith as Audrey.

Orlando and Rosalind come across as very ordinary people in this production. Lucy Phelps is delightful as Rosalind and gives a charming physical performance. David Ajao is full of energy as Orlando. A few of the parts have had their gender changed. While Sophie Stanton is fine as the melancholy Jacques there doesn't seem much point in changing the part to a female. The play looks good and the actors all perform delightfully.

The RSC is in residence at each venue for several nights, with each of the plays being performed on different dates within the residency.

Here's the list of venues and dates. Do take the opportunity to see this and one or more of the other plays when you get the chance.

Canterbury – The Marlowe: 29 January to 8 February

Plymouth – Theatre Royal: 12 to 22 February

Nottingham – Theatre Royal: 26 February to 7 March

Newcastle-upon-Tyne – Theatre Royal: 11 to 21 March

Blackpool – Grand Theatre: 25 March to 4 April

For more information, go to www.rsc.org.uk

Date	Branch	Events	Contact
25th Jan	National	Excursions™, Alexandra Palace, London	www.excursionsshow.com
30th Jan	National	South West Group Travel Show, We The Curious, Bristol	www.southwestgroupshow.com
End of Jan	National	Deadline for #6 AGTO magazine copy	Branch Chair or Magazine coordinator
6th Feb	Kent	The Painted Hall, Greenwich and Cream Tea	Jim Silvester jamessilvester600@msn.com
21st-23rd Feb	National	AGTO Showcase & AGM Ettington Chase, Stratford Upon Avon	www.agto.co.uk
21st-23rd Feb		Central & Western Branch AGMs Western Spring Meeting	
25th Feb	National	The Northern GO Travel Show, Manchester	www.grouptravelorganiser.com
28th Feb	National	Saint Hill Manor Group Visits Fair, East Grinstead	www.sussextopattractions.co.uk
8th Mar	Eastern	Spencer House, St James's, London	Joan Hanks joan.hanks@virginmedia.com
15th Mar	National	Holiday & Leisure Show, Detling, Nr. Maidstone, Kent	www.theholidayandleisureshow.co.uk
25th-25th Mar	National	British Tourism & Travel Show, NEC, Birmingham	www.tourismshow.co.uk
22nd Apr	National	Go Travel Show, Kempton Park	www.gotravelshow.com
May	Eastern	Essex Police Museum	Joan Hanks joan.hanks@virginmedia.com
20th June	Western	Chavenage house, Beverston, Glos	Martin Gibson mgibson.gts@taltalk.net
July	Eastern	Stockwood Discovery Park, Luton	Joan Hanks joan.hanks@virginmedia.com
27-29th Sept	Western	AGM weekend - Salisbury & surrounding area	Martin Gibson mgibson.gts@taltalk.net
8th Oct	National	Group Leisure & Travel Show, Milton Keynes	www.grouptravelshow.com
14th Oct	National	Group Buyers Forum, Salford Quays	www.stevereedtourism.co.uk
19th Oct	Eastern	Family Day at Hampton Court, river trip & much more	Joan Hanks joan.hanks@virginmedia.com
4th-6th Nov	National	World Travel Market, Excel, London	www.london.wtm.co.uk
20th-24th Nov	Kent	Autumn Break, Daish's Holidays for Groups, Kendal	Jim Silvester jamessilvester600@msn.com
9th Dec	Kent	Christmas Get Together, Boathouse Pub, Yalding	Jim Silvester jamessilvester600@msn.com

THE LAST WORD... Fam trips are important, but...

For many GTOs, fam trips are an important way to discover new destinations and visitor attractions. However, as AGTO chief executive Wendy Hartley-Scarff explains, there's more to being a successful GTO than simply watching the email inbox.

Over the years, especially if you've been a group travel organiser for a while, you'll have been on quite a few fam trips. They come in many shapes and sizes, from a one-day taster visit to a country house or historic town, to a full-blown continental European itinerary.

There is, of course, always a reason why a fam trip has been organised. It might be a group tour operator keen to highlight a new destination, a hotel wanting to raise its profile and show off its 'new and improved' facilities, or a tourist office with something new to shout about. Of course, for the host, organising a fam trip has its risks. There's no guarantee that a GTO will ever return. Most of us can recount an example of travelling on a

fam trip and hearing a fellow GTO say that the place is very nice, "but my group doesn't like this sort of thing".

Those organising fam trips also have to be on the lookout for group travel organisations that say they can put together a party of GTOs, but when the party turns up it comprises three or four GTOs and several friends. Thankfully, this type of behaviour seems to be on the wane.

AGTO has a presence at all the group travel trade shows. Part of our process in accepting new members is finding out what group they're involved with, and how many trips they might organise in a year. No guarantees of course, but it's one way to try and maintain a membership that is proactive and keen to discover new group travel opportunities.

But that's only part of the story. These days a GTO needs to be proficient in many areas, skills that are often built up over time. But wonderful though most GTOs are, I'd suggest that it's impossible to know everything. It's important then that we need to be confident in the support we receive from organisations we belong to.

AGTO is all about community, a community made up of individual group travel organisers, and supported by our many Associate members. It is our Associates, our industry suppliers who, in addition to providing some first-class products, also give so much professional support and guidance. It is very much appreciated.

In February, the 2020 AGTO Showcase Weekend takes place at Ettington Chase near Stratford-upon-Avon. Away from the pressures of trade shows, the weekend provides an invaluable opportunity for GTO members and Associate members to mix informally. Add in fam trips, this time to Shakespeare Country, a travel trade exhibition, a gala dinner and first-class entertainment, and it's easy to see why demand for places is high.

Our regional Branches continue to do sterling work, providing opportunities for their local GTOs to meet, socialise and share stories and ideas.

I mention all this because with political uncertainty seemingly set to continue for some time, GTOs need all the help they can get to make it as easy as possible to organise great experiences for their groups.

AGTO is proud of being the UK's largest independent membership organisation supporting and representing the interests of individuals who organise travel for groups. We take that responsibility very seriously, and look forward to announcing new initiatives in 2020.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, may I wish you a very happy Christmas and a wonderfully successful new year.

Wendy Hartley-Scarff
CEO, AGTO



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