



WESTERN WAYS
AGTO Western Branch
2020 Winter Edition

Western Branch's Chairman's Message **Roger Sims 2388W**

It has been a quiet few months on the AGTO front both before and since Christmas for Helen and I due to many of the 2020 plans being in place for Western Branch activities since September 2019. However I hope that your groups have been busy and have some great plans for 2020.

I would like to inform you that due to personal family considerations, I am regrettably unable to continue as the Western Branch Board Representative, and in January I tendered my resignation to AGTO CEO Wendy Hartley-Scarff and to David Steele. The Western Committee has been informed and Gill Brooker our Secretary is seeking a Western Branch member to fill this role. It is interesting, rewarding and a crucial link with the AGTO National Committee. In the meantime I will continue to liaise between the branch and AGTO.

I look forward to seeing you at the following two events:

The AGTO Showcase Weekend including the National AGM and Western Branch Spring Meeting.

Stratford upon Avon from Friday 21st - Sunday 23rd February 2020. Located at the Ettington Chase Hotel there will be a large number of Associate Member's stands offering all sorts of attractive propositions for your group. In addition there will be fam. visits by coach, dinner on Friday and a Gala dinner on Saturday and excellent accommodation. If the 2019 Showcase weekend is anything to go by you will be amazed at the options on offer to keep you busy the whole 3 days.



- **Western Branch Summer Fam. and meeting, at Chavenage, Nr Tetbury, Gloucestershire 20th June 2020.** Further details and the booking form are at the back of this Newsletter.



The committee hope to be able to confirm that the **Western Branch AGM will be held at the Metropole Hotel and Spa, Llandridod Wells, LD1 5DY from 13-15th November 2020.** More details will be in the next edition of Western Ways.

GTO Reports !!

**Wales & Midlands Travel Club
Guided Tour of Coates English Willow
Farm & Wetlands Visitor Centre
& Lunch provided by
The Lemon Tree Coffee House
Thursday 3rd October 2019
By Heather Taylor W1008**

The Willow & Wetlands Centre is the home of the Coates Family who have been growing willows on the Somerset Levels since 1819. They have been farming, growing and processing Somerset withies and manufacturing a wide range of



genuine
hand-made
basket-ware.
Coates
English
Willow is

also home to the renowned Coates Charcoal which is produced on site and exported worldwide.

Over 30 years ago the Travel Club had their last visit to Coates English Willow Farm, it was decided earlier this year we would look at a trip for 2019. So once again, 4 members of the Travel Club committee went on a recce. It was February, very cold & damp, however we received a warm welcome from the staff at Coates Visitor Centre & the Lemon Tree Coffee House.



So on
the 3rd

October, 40 plus set off from south east Wales hoping for a dry day, as it was forecast very heavy rain for the afternoon. The traffic on the roads was light compared to what we had expected and so we arrived early! This allowed those in the group who wanted to, to do the

Willow Walk. This turned out to our advantage due to the wet weather due later.

The buffet lunch had been booked for 12:30pm and as we were classed as a large group the lunch was served in the Conference Room. We had an excellent lunch provided by the Lemon Tree Coffee House, all the quiches & pies were "homemade", & for anyone with special dietary needs their meals had been booked in advance.

After lunch the group were split into 2 groups. The 1st group were given a guided tour to find out how willow is processed & watch the basket weavers making all sorts of willow goods.



The 2nd
group had
time to
visit the
Basket
Museum &
shop, also

the central Courtyard which is home to a group of individual shops, before their turn on the guided tour.

About 10 minutes into the 2nd tour the rain arrived!

Due to arriving early, this allowed the group to depart earlier in the afternoon to return to South Wales, rather than be walking in the rain! We all had a wonderful day, and enjoyed the lunch before the excellent guided tour & shopping!

With thanks to Ellie Tee at Coates for helping me to arrange the visit/guided tour of Coates, also Jeff Dale & staff from the Lemon Tree Coffee House for our lovely lunch, and finally Gareth our coach driver from Mainline Travel.

Anyone looking to find Coates from the M5, you need junction 25 & then follow the signs.

AGTO Northern Branch LANCS Familiarisation Trip 2019

A few of us from Western Branch decided we would like to join the Northern Branch FAM weekend. After contacting Bob Walker of Northern, 4 of us booked to go. However, as everyone was due to meet at the hotel near Preston by 1pm on the Friday we realised straight away we would not get there by then due to problems on the M5 & M6 [especially on a Friday!] as two were travelling from Devon & another two from Cardiff.

We decided to travel north on the Thursday & Bob very kindly made arrangements with the hotel for the 4 of us to have 1 nights extra half board.

Martin & Lorraine came to Cardiff on the Wednesday afternoon from Teignmouth, and then on the Thursday due to the weather & the problems on the motorways we travelled north on the A roads as far as Junction 19 of the M6. Thank goodness we did travel on the Thursday as we would never have arrived on time on the Friday.

The Mercure Samlesbury Hotel was 1 mile east approx. of junction 31 of the M6 which is ideal for a coach party staying.

The hotel has had a major make over & we were pleased to find the bathrooms in our bedrooms had proper walk in showers. Thankfully getting rid of those awful showers over the baths with a plastic curtain which wrap around you!!

We had a leisurely evening with an excellent meal in the restaurant; the staff we met were very friendly & helpful.

Due to everyone else not arriving until about 1pm on the Friday, this allowed us to have a bit of a lie in and have breakfast at 9am. When we arrived down for breakfast it was to find the weather outside looking a bit damp.

Just after mid-day Northern Branch members & guest started arriving, and most had a warm drink & some lunch.

I knew Pam Wharton from Ellen Smith was providing the coach.

For me it was great to see an Ellen Smith Coach, as I was originally from Rochdale and as a child used to travel on Ellen Smith coaches with school trips [going back to the 1960s!!], a bit of nostalgia. Pam came around to introduce herself to our group.

The FAM weekend then began, and what a lovely time we had, as Northern will be publishing a report on the weekend I decided not to repeat this, except to say a number of the places we visited I'd heard of but not visited before.



On the Friday afternoon we visited Samlesbury Hall which was about 5 mins from the hotel & thought this was an excellent place to take a group who are interested in history & especially around Halloween as you can meet "Janey" the local witch [she was excellent & funny]. After a drink & cake it was back to the hotel for a rest before the evening meal.

Saturday was going to be a full day, starting with a Kingfisher canal boat trip with a cream tea! & then a little time at Barton Grange Garden Centre. From there we headed to Oswaldtwistle Mills for lunch. The soup & sandwich provided with a hot drink was very good & very welcoming. Afterwards we had a guided tour of the area on the coach which would prove useful to people wanting to take their group at a later date. We then returned to Oswaldtwistle Mills to have

some free time for Xmas shopping before returning to the hotel for dinner.

Sunday was our last day, so packed the bags & car and then headed for breakfast. Sadly the weather was VERY misty, thankfully as we headed north on the M6 on the Ellen Smith coach, the weather cleared and we had an excellent view of the countryside.



Our first stop was Leighton Hall, what a fantastic drive down to this. We thoroughly enjoyed our visit and were pleased to see it is still a family home & members of the family are also some of the guides.



We had one final destination which Phil had been waiting for all weekend!

This was Carnforth Station. Phil & I have visited the Station on a number of occasions over the years. Those of you who know Phil will know how interested he is in steam trains!! When we married in 1973, we spent part of our honeymoon visiting Carnforth Station [which looked nothing like it is now] & Steamtown Railway Museum. I had wanted to see where Brief Encounter had been filmed; sadly in 1973 it was more or less derelict.

What a wonderful place the Station/Tea Room is now. Unfortunately, many people had to make a decision of lunch or a quick visit around the wonderful Heritage Centre. As we had a long journey back south we opted for some lunch – the soup was delicious. If you are taking a group to Scotland or North West England what a fantastic stop for your group [I expect you can book in advance, for say a soup & roll with a drink etc. instead of paying motorway prices]

Needless to say over the years I have been converted to steam train trips!

The coach then took us all back to the hotel to collect our cars and head home.

A big thank you to Pam Wharton & Ellen Smith, and also a thank you to Northern branch for allowing us to join them on their FAM Weekend. It was lovely to meet up with Northern members we had not seen for some years. Also, a big thank you to all the places we visited for allowing us there on a FAM.

Phil & I would also like to thank Martin for being our driver from Cardiff to Lancashire & back.

Heather & Phil Taylor
W1008 & W1923
& Martin & Lorraine Gibson W1231

**Stuart Singers Venray Tour 18 -21
October 2019 – This was not a holiday -
but so much more!!**

The Journey Out - Friday 18th October

Fear, excitement and pouring rain – our trip to Venray had begun. It was 4.45 a.m. and very dark. After 12 months planning and many conversations, we found ourselves packed and sitting on a Rover coach heading to Dover. Quickly settling and trying to catch up on our sleep we were unusually quiet. Stopping at services for breakfast (second for some of us) and still only 8 a.m. ish, we changed drivers saying goodbye to Adrian and hello to Lee (who was now with us to the end!). The journey was long but we trusted the experience and efficiency of our driver. The 'highlight' was being shut in 'the shed' for random custom checks on our luggage – 6 cases – all good! The crossing from Dover was slow, grey and lumpy but didn't really take long – about an hour and a half. Then another coffee and on our way again. Rain continued throughout the journey on flat, tree lined roads and we were soon in Belgium, making good progress – until Antwerp (we thought we had traffic problems in UK!), an interesting



multicultural city that looked a little tired, or was that just us?

Now behind schedule we were really looking forward to arriving at the hotel which we did at about 6:15 p.m. After a wonderful welcome from our advance party we felt upbeat again but quickly had to check in, eat dinner and get off to the rehearsal for a 7.30pm start.

Wow! What a theatre – welcoming, large, professional, maybe a bit overwhelming to our amateur singers, but the Dutch Musical Director Joop and the young

orchestra were already in place and enthusiastic to get on with the rehearsal. Once the personal mics were in place we sang with gusto, the orchestra were impressed with us and Helen Sims (our Musical Director) was relieved that her teaching and the weeks of rehearsal were paying off. After a while we gained in confidence and 'Earth Song' turned out rather well, the soloist was fantastic. At 10.15pm - more than 19 hours after getting up – stop time! Back to the hotel for well earned (rather lovely) sandwiches and bed. (by Helen Salisbury Soprano member)

Freedom Concert. Saturday 19th October

What an honour to participate in such a moving musical celebration in commemoration of a day, 75 years ago, when life started to flow back into Venray after four years of occupation by a hostile neighbour. The skirl of the bagpipes and a lone piper making his slow passage to the stage from the back of the auditorium started the evening, the strains of Scotland the Brave reverberating effortlessly around the auditorium to shatter any preconceived idea of the spectacle to come.

With focus turned towards Remembrance, I found myself shedding a quiet tear for the soldier lying in the corner of some foreign field, a harrowing reminder of those who died during the battles for liberation, never to be blessed again by the suns of home. Lost but not forgotten, and through the voices of the Stuart Singers, brought to the forefront of people's minds. "No man no madness, can possess or conquer my country's heart", from Anthem, provided a perfect epitaph for the invasion, and the Netherlanders' resistance to the human catastrophe that took their nation by force, accentuated through the haunting title track from 'Schindler's List', played so beautifully by a young violinist.

Following weeks of concern about head microphones and counting empty bars on sheet music for our cue, I take my hat off to Joop the Musical Director. After two rehearsals we were singing easily to his command. An eclectic mix of tunes bought an exceptional final  to celebrate the freedom of his country.



But the evening was not just about the music. It was also about friendship, the hand extended as it had been all those years before, expressed poignantly through one small voice, joined by five others to sell an idea of what can be achieved when you believe in it, picked up and spread by our combined voices to deliver a powerful message of love and the special relationship between our two nations. (by Paul Hayward, Bass member).



Sunday 20th October 2019

Well, what a day! No time to linger over breakfast before getting back on the coach again to travel to the nearby Commonwealth War Grave Cemetery for the 75th commemoration of the liberation of Venray. Given the forecast for a morning of steady rain, we were all issued with blue see-through plastic ponchos



which did us no favours sartorially – Steve, who was under a gazebo with the piano, declared that we had the look of a Smurf convention!

Once the service got underway, we forgot the rain and became engrossed in the very moving and emotional proceedings. After performances from the local brass band and the Scots Guards bagpiper, British, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand veterans were amongst those honoured for their bravery and the huge gratitude of the Dutch people for their part in the liberation of the area was evident in all that they said and did. The veterans or



their countries' representatives came up in turn to lay flowers and wreaths at the foot of the memorial cross, assisted by the young people of the local scout movement. The oldest British veteran walked to the mike and read part of a poem before laying his

flowers. At 107 years old, he was an inspiration to us all and those of us feeling a bit sorry for ourselves as we sat for over 2 hours in the rain, many of us with heavy colds, were shamed by the resilience of the elderly veterans who were uncomplaining in just their uniforms. A 10-year-old boy sounded the 'Reveille' with assurance. It was an honour for the Stuart Singers choir (representing the UK)

to perform their two pieces, 'Let there be peace on earth' and 'Abide with me' during the ceremony.

Particularly moving for us was the 'unofficial' speech given by the Mayor (after ceremonially taking off his chain of office). He expressed the sadness of the Dutch people that the UK was on the verge of leaving the EU and told us that they loved us and that they would see Britain as special friends for ever because of the part we had played in the liberation. His words brought many of us to tears. The ceremony's finale was the placing of a rose on each of the 692 war graves by the young scouts and the announcement of the undertaking to place a photograph of each of the fallen soldiers upon their grave. Also the tradition of giving chocolates to all the younger generation was carried out.

Back to the hotel for a rushed lunch and off to the concert in the grounds of the ruined castle at Geijsteren. A large audience enjoyed a joint concert with the Limburgse Jagers band and choirs from the Netherlands, Germany and ourselves.



The first half was music mainly dedicated to peace, unity and freedom. After the interval, during which our hosts provided a

wonderful range of drinks and food, the music was on the lighter side.

Our contributions included 'On holy ground', 'Wade in the water', 'Let there be music', 'As long as I have music' and 'Showboat medley', the latter being particularly well received. When it came to rounding off the concert, it became clear that the encore we had prepared was not going to be suitable. Each choir was to sing something celebrating unity, peace and friendship. Some quick-thinking by Helen saved the day and we reprised 'Let there be peace on earth' as we all held hands. (Not wanting to sound immodest, but it was very pleasing that our Saturday concert conductor Joop, who was in the audience, indicated afterwards that he thought the Stuart Singers performed best of the three choirs.)

Back to the hotel and at last we were able to have a leisurely dinner and breathe a sigh of relief that we had survived! All those who had contributed to the success of the tour were thanked, in particular Helen Sims for the musical preparations over the previous 6 months and Bruce Salisbury who had a challenging task in making sure all went to plan. It remained only to socialise in the bar and remember what a privilege it had been to be part of this wonderful commemoration.

(by Charlie Wise, Tenor member)

Please forgive the length of this report but choir members were over-whelmed by the experience and I felt it should be reported in full. I hope you have enjoyed reading it.

A tour with a difference.

Helen Sims Choir Musical Director and GTO (2150)



AGTO Western Branch Summer Fam Visit

SATURDAY 20TH JUNE 2020 – CHAVENAGE near Tetbury

Chavenage is a wonderful Elizabethan House and has been used as a location for many other TV shows and films, such as Lark Rise to Candleford, The House of Eliott & Poldark. For those of you who watch Poldark, you will know it better as Trenwith House.

Western Branch has made arrangements with Caroline the manager of Chavenage & elder daughter of the owners for a FAM visit with a guided tour followed by a buffet lunch.

Joanna, Caroline's younger sister, runs the in-house catering, she can cater for all needs & is arranging a buffet lunch, anyone with special dietary needs, please ensure details are shown on the booking form.

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.

Details for the Day as follows

10:30am – arrive for meet & greet with tea/coffee & biscuits

11:00am – guided tour with what Chavenage can offer for groups

12:30pmish – buffet lunch in the Ballroom

1:30pmish – Western Branch Meeting

2:30pmish – items on show that can be bought by groups & if possible people can buy on the day

2:45pmish – depart

COST – AGTO Members £16 Non Members/Guest £18

We have obtained a discounted rate for the Branch which includes, entrance fee, drinks on arrival, buffet lunch, guided tour & the Meeting Room.

If you have not visited Tetbury before, you have time to visit before heading home.



For those booking, details on how to get to Chavenage will be sent to you nearer the date.

This will show you the way you would bring a coach party to the House & grounds.

CHAVENAGE BOOKING FORM WESTERN BRANCH				FAMILIARISATION VISIT DETAILS	
Association Group Travel Organisers				DESTINATION:	Chavenage near Tetbury
				FROM	20 th June 2020
				TO	20 th June 2020
				No of NIGHTS:	0
2. NAME & ADDRESS OF LEAD PERSON TO WHOM ALL CORRESPONDENCE WILL BE SENT					
MR/MRS/MS		FIRST NAME:		SURNAME:	
ADDRESS:					POSTCODE
AGTO Member No		CONTACT TEL:			
MOBILE		Email			
3. DETAILS OF ALL PASSENGERS TRAVELLING, INCLUDING PERSON NAMED ABOVE					
Mr/Mrs/Ms	FIRST NAME	SURNAME			
4. SPECIAL REQUESTS INCLUDING DIETARY, DISABILITIES, ALLERGIES.					
NAME		SPECIAL REQUEST			
NAME		SPECIAL REQUEST			
NAME		SPECIAL REQUEST			
<i>PLEASE NOTE: WHILST WE WILL ENDEAVOUR TO SATISFY YOUR REQUEST, WE CANNOT GUARANTEE ANY SPECIAL REQUEST</i>					
5. HOLIDAY COST				6. PAYMENT DETAILS	
ITEMS	PRICE PER PERSON		No. REQ'D		TOTAL
Member	£16.00	x		=	£
Guest	£18.00	x		=	£
Other supplements, reductions, Excursions etc					
				=	
TOTAL COST					£
					£
Pay with booking OR deposit of £5 per person & Balance to be paid by 1 st April 2020					£
7. SEND YOUR COMPLETED FORM to:					
Mr M Gibson, Treasurer, 6 Ashleigh Way, Teignmouth, Devon TQ14 8QT. Tel: 01626 773503					

**Thank you for supporting AGTO
Western Branch**

