

AG  
TO

association of  
group travel organisers

MAGAZINE

issue 6 | March 2020



Another successful AGTO Showcase Weekend



# Springtime inspiration

**Sitting down to write this introduction to our spring issue reminds me how eventful the last few months have been. Storms and the coronavirus have affected many of us in one way or another.**

But as the evenings get lighter I'm reminded of one of my favourite springtime sayings: "Spring breathes new life into the world around us." It seems an apt description for GTOs, keen to give groups new experiences and consign the cold, wet and windy days to the past.

In this issue we report on another successful AGTO Showcase Weekend. There's also a real mix of reports from members, all keen to share their experiences and, hopefully, offer you some inspiration and ideas for your own groups.

Our regional branches organise some wonderful trips. If you've not been on one yet, get in touch. It really could put a spring in your step.

Wendy Hartley-Scarff  
Chief Executive, AGTO

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AGTO Magazine is published by the  
Association of Group Travel Organisers



## SUCCESSFUL AGTO SHOWCASE WEEKEND 2020 HIGHLIGHTS NEW GROWTH IN SOLO TRAVEL

Solo travel as part of a group is thriving, according to Debbie Marshall, managing director of Silver Travel Advisor, the website for the over 50s mature traveller.

She was presenting to members at the annual AGTO Showcase Weekend that took place at the end of February at Ettington Chase Hotel.

She told the 115 delegates that a growing number of solo travellers are choosing to travel on their own but as part of a group, often because they no longer have a partner to travel with, or by choice, either choosing to travel with girlfriends or simply because their partner doesn't want to go with them.

This year's AGTO Showcase Weekend was supported by Shakespeare's England which arranged four familiarisation trips that included Warwick and Kenilworth Castles, the British Motor Museum and Shakespeare's Birthplace.

The popular AGTO Associates' Exhibition saw around 60 tourism suppliers meeting with GTO members from around the UK. A highlight of the event was the Gala Dinner, sponsored by made Tourism Marketing with a 1920s 'Peaky Blinders' theme.

Commenting on the event, AGTO chief executive Wendy Hartley-Scarff says: "The annual AGTO Showcase Weekend provides a catalyst for GTOs and our Associate supplier members to network and socialise. This year's programme, supported by Shakespeare's England, made Tourism Marketing and Cruise & Maritime Voyages, provided our GTO members with lots of inspiration and ideas to take back to their groups. It also gave our Associate supplier members the opportunity to find out more about the changing expectations of group travel organisers."

Turn to page 6 for a full report and pictures from this year's AGTO Showcase Weekend.



Debbie Marshall, Silver Travel Advisor (left),  
Helen Peters, Shakespeare's England (centre),  
and Wendy Hartley-Scarff, AGTO (right)

# News Update

## SUCCESS FOR DUNWOOD AT WARNER AWARDS

Dunwood Travel was named 'Coach Operator of the Decade' at the Warner Coach Operator Awards. The event, the first time it has been held for 10 years, took place at Warner Leisure Hotels Norton Grange on the Isle of Wight on 28 January. Dunwood Travel also received the Hotel Choice Award, a category voted on by each of Warner's 14 hotels, and recognising the best relationships with coach operators, and the award for 'Most Group Business 2019'. The photo shows directors Colin Duncan and Phil Westwood receiving their awards from Warner Leisure Hotels National Sales Manager Martyn Stagg (centre).



## SOCIAL MEDIA RECEIVES A BOOST

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.

## ARE YOUR PHOTOS BREAKING THE LAW?

Did you know that taking a photo off the internet to use in your group newsletter could result in you being taken to court?

If you use a photo that's protected by copyright without getting permission from the copyright owner, or paying a fee, you may be guilty of copyright infringement, and the penalties can be harsh.

Copyright is what protects original works of many kinds from being wrongly duplicated and distributed.



AGTO, either centrally or at branch level, produces a range of printed materials including magazines, marketing materials and promotional collateral. It is therefore important that we all make sure that the photos we use are our own, are freely available, or we have permission from the copyright owner.

It's vital that if you use an image from the internet you understand whether there's a need to pay for it. You may, as an example, be planning a trip and need a photo of the destination. You go to the tourism website and find a suitable photo. It is always wise to contact the tourism office and ask permission to use it. In reality, the tourism office is likely to send you a much higher resolution and better quality version.

The danger lies when you decide to search online for a photo of a destination that you're planning to visit. The images that appear are collated from all over the internet. Some will be free to use, but others may not be. Clicking on the image will usually reveal whether there's any copyright.

One of the main punishments for copyright infringement is the award of damages. If you're accused of infringing the copyrights of a copyright holder who registered their copyright within three months of publication, the copyright holder can seek statutory damages.

AGTO has recently been embroiled in sorting out an issue with regard to the illegal use of an image, something that was done in complete innocence. We have now resolved our copyright issue but at a cost to AGTO as the copyright holder was awarded damages.

So please make sure when using photos that haven't been taken by yourself, or a member of your group or company, that you have permission to use them, or that you've paid a licence fee to use them. If you do end up paying a fee, do make sure you understand whether the fee is for single or multiple use.



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# Guest Columnist: Rob Carroll



**Rob Carroll, Commercial Manager at Airedale Tours, describes why we should escape to Scotland without groups and enjoy the incredible scenic railways the country has to offer.**

People often ask me to name my favourite destination. Of all the places I could choose, Scotland is closest to my heart for very personal reasons. It was my late-mum's favourite place.

Northbound by train from Edinburgh to Inverness is a real gem. ScotRail's route takes you across the UNESCO World Heritage masterpiece Forth Bridge. Once past Dumbarton the scenery unfolds, skirting Loch Lomond en route to Crianlarich, where the West Highland Line splits into its western branch to Oban and northern branch to Fort William. I hit a left for Oban, mum's favourite place on Earth.

This line ticks every box for those seeking lochs and glens. Loch Awe is so aptly named, and the track runs along the northern shore, while those travelling by car see little of the loch from the heavily tree-lined road above. Nearby Cruachan mountain hides within it a secret masterpiece of engineering, a hydroelectric power station buried deep within the mountain. At the Falls of Lora the Connel Bridge rolls into view, the place where my

parents would plonk their caravan, looking out across the shore. At journey's end is Oban, a rail terminus but a busy hub for onward ferries to the Hebrides.

The northern branch of the West Highland Line (connecting Glasgow to Fort William and Mallaig) is for me the greatest of all railway journeys on these islands. While the line's infamy reaches across the world with Harry Potter, the Glenfinnan Viaduct and the Jacobite Steam Train, and rightly so, these attractions are on the remote section between Fort William and the coastal fishing port of Mallaig.

But it's not the best bit! For me the line between Fort William and Glasgow has it all. Whereas ScotRail's Oban trains meander through the lochs and glens I described earlier, the northern branch climbs from beneath Ben Nevis into Highlands as bleak as they are beguiling.

On Rannoch Moor the track floats on peat boglands across the high heather, a scene of desolate yet devastating beauty, so remote from our existence that no roads

lead here. Deer scamper into the distance at the intrusion of human life in a scene of idyllic and splendid isolation.

The track now following a vastly different and wilder route to the road, we tick off Corrour, the highest altitude station in the UK, backdrop of the remote scenes of the film *Trainspotting*. At Crianlarich we rejoin the track to Glasgow via Loch Lomond, Loch Long, Gareloch and the Firth of Clyde.

Whenever I find myself on the ScotRail trains that service these routes I'm always impressed, but left dreaming. Dreaming that ScotRail (or someone!) might hook a panoramic carriage onto the train, with seats and tables, windows stretching to the sky, haggis, neeps and tatties served to your seat and a wee dram of single malt to finish as Fort William approaches.

Think Glacier Express. Then imagine Glenfinnan Express. How could it be anything other than a roaring success?! Maybe I'm just Caledonia dreaming, but I keep coming back.

I love this place. Thanks mum!



# Another successful Showcase Weekend

**AGTO members from across Britain travelled to Stratford-upon-Avon in February for the annual AGTO Showcase Weekend.**

The event, held this year at Ettington Chase hotel, provides the platform for GTO and Associate members to come together to network and socialise. A programme of familiarisation trips, expertly organised by the team at Shakespeare's England, saw members heading off on board coaches kindly supplied by Johnsons Quality Coach Travel to explore Warwick Castle, Warwick Market Museum, Kenilworth Castle and the British Motor Museum at Gaydon. There were guided tours of Shakespeare's Birthplace and the costume store at the Royal

Shakespeare Company, as well as Compton Verney Art Gallery and

Park, and Lord Leycester Hospital.

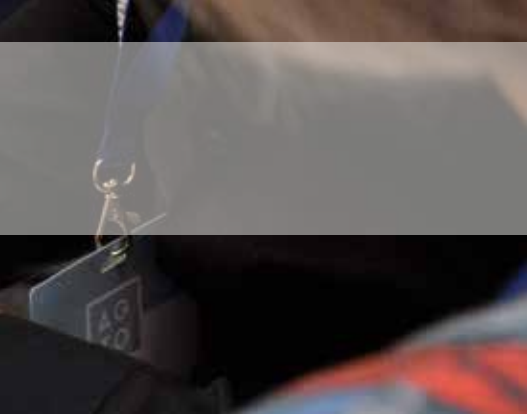
On the Friday afternoon, Wendy Hartley-Scarff, AGTO chief executive, welcomed delegates before introducing Helen Peters, chief executive of Shakespeare's England who outlined the many group-friendly attractions and events that will appeal to group tour planners. She said that renewed efforts are being made to encourage visitors to stop-over rather than simply visit on a day trip.

Debbie Marshall, managing director of Silver Travel Advisor, the award-winning website that carries travel

“  
**Older travellers  
are embracing  
gadgets,  
technology and  
social media  
like never  
before**”



**Matt Coulter, Historic Royal Palaces, receives the prize for being 'Best Dressed' from Jonathan Mountford, MD of Gala Dinner-sponsor made Tourism Marketing. Joining them are Wendy Hartley-Scarff and two flapper dancers**



reviews and holiday advice for the over 50s mature traveller, gave an entertaining presentation that looked at trends in the market. She told delegates that not only is group travel on the up, but that solo group travel is thriving, with holidaymakers choosing to travel on their own in a group, either because of circumstance, or by choice. She explained that older travellers are embracing gadgets, technology and social media like never before, and that for many, holidays and tours are not all about price.

Stuart Render of coach and group tourism specialist Stuart Render Tourism updated members on the Package Travel Regulations explaining that GTOs who organise occasional trips that are 'not for profit' are likely to be exempt. However, he made the point that using a bonded tour operator, and checking who the bond is with, provides added peace of mind and financial security for GTOs and their groups.

Wendy Hartley-Scarff brought members up to date with the latest news about AGTO itself, saying that in addition to the launch of a new website and promotional video, pro-active PR activity is helping raise the profile of the



organisation in the trade media and with industry stakeholders. Membership continues to grow with a total of more than 650

GTOs and Associates. However, she stressed that the future of AGTO isn't just about membership growth, it's about growing member participation in the local branches.

“

**Using a bonded tour operator... provides added peace of mind and financial security for GTOs and their groups**

A key element of the weekend is always the Associates' Exhibition that takes place on the Saturday morning. This year there were around 40 exhibitors representing hotels, destinations, visitor





attractions, tour operators and other suppliers. Shakespeare's England had brought along a further 18 exhibitors giving GTOs nearly 60 tourism suppliers to meet.

But the Showcase Weekend isn't all work. On the Friday evening delegates enjoyed a Networking Drinks Reception sponsored by Cruise & Maritime Voyages before sitting down to dinner.

This year's Gala Dinner, sponsored by made Tourism Marketing, featured a 1920s theme focused around the imagery from the TV series 'Peaky Blinders'. Guests arriving for the evening's drinks reception were able to sample a variety of gins supplied by the Shakespeare Distillery. Entertainment was provided by the 'Silk Street Jazz 4' band and two appropriately dressed flapper dancers.

Members had been encouraged to 'dress to impress – 1920s style', the prize for 'best dressed' being presented by made MD, Jonathan Mountford to Matt Coulter from Historic Royal Palaces.

But in a weekend full of activity and enjoyable experiences, there was







## The future of AGTO isn't just about membership growth, it's about growing member participation in the local branches

another surprise in store.

In a specially produced video, Associate member Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines announced that the AGTO Showcase Weekend 2021 won't be a weekend at all, but a cruise! The cruise operator will be hosting AGTO members on board the 'Black Watch' for a two night cruise from Liverpool to Southampton. The package includes two nights dinner, bed and breakfast, a full programme of entertainment and full use of the ship's facilities. Full details of this very special event, and how to apply, are being sent to members.

Commenting on this year's Showcase Weekend, Wendy Hartley-Scarff says: "My thanks must go to our AGTO team, including Joan Hanks, David Steele and Jade Valentine, for organising a first-class event. My thanks also go to made Tourism Marketing, Shakespeare's England and Cruise & Maritime Voyages for their support, and to Debbie Marshall from Silver Travel Advisor. But without doubt, my main thanks go to our GTO and Associate members who took time out to travel to Stratford to enjoy what turned out to be a very special weekend."













# Eileen gets refund through legal helpline

**When GTO Eileen Booker from Kent branch found herself up against a hotel chain that was refusing to refund her following a litany of complaints from members of her group she turned to Travlaw, AGTO's free legal helpline, for help. The result was better than she had expected!**

In July 2019 I took a group of 59 people for a five-night stay at a hotel in Telford in Shropshire. I had been to the hotel in 2018 to 'look it over' and at that time met the manager who showed around the hotel and told me that they were in the middle of total redecoration. He assured me that by the time I took the group all the rooms would be fully refurbished.

When we arrived in July, all the rooms in the new part of the hotel were fine. However, my husband and I were 'upgraded' to the bridal suite in the old part of the hotel. It sounds ideal, but the curtains were hanging off, we had no hot water, no working telephone or television. The two couples in the rooms next to ours had no hot water either. Two rooms had wasp infestations and we discovered that had been the case since May and nothing had been done about it.

Two couples were housed in the Gate Lodge. Again, it sounds wonderful but these poor people had no locks

on their doors, no working television or telephone, no chair, no wardrobe and no hangers. Across the hotel, several rooms had mould in the bathrooms and generally the place could have done with a good clean.

Needless to say I complained immediately to the duty manager who assured me that things would be put right. Indeed, the people in the Gate Lodge did get locks on their doors, but apart from that nothing else was done, and all despite reassurances from the management that the complaints would be dealt with.

The evening meals were a total fiasco too. Food that was ordered was offered to the wrong tables, resulting in one table of guests regularly being told that what they had ordered was not available. The duty manager gave everyone complimentary wine on the last night and a small box of chocolates each as an apology gesture.

On the final day of the visit I had a long meeting with the duty manager. She offered me a financial refund for those of my customers who had been affected by their problems. I accepted this and was told the money would be in my account very shortly. I made sure she put this in writing.

That was in July 2019. Since then I have lost count of the number of phone calls and emails I've made as well as sending a recorded letter (which was signed for) to senior management. Not one of these were answered. Several of my customers also wrote to the manager of the hotel, but again not one letter was answered.

Because I had been promised the refund (which I had in writing) I had decided that I would refund all the members of the group who had problems out of my own money. You can imagine how anxious I was to get



*In a difficult situation? Travlaw might be able to help!*



the refund I had been promised!

Eventually in December I received an email from the hotel's head office stating that it was not company policy to give refunds, and offering my group a one-night stay at a choice of their hotels, BUT they were all in the Midlands!

At this stage I remembered that as a member of AGTO we have access to a free legal helpline provided by a company called Travlaw. I duly phoned them and spoke to a very helpful lady called Sophie. I sent her copies of all the correspondence and she assured me that I had a good case to get a refund. A letter was drafted, which I checked, and was sent to the head office of the chain of the hotels. It arrived at the hotel's offices in the morning, and by the late afternoon the refund was in my bank! Success!

The letter that Travlaw drafted proved to be just what was needed, and certainly did the trick. The initial consultation with Sophie was free of charge, but as you would expect there was then a charge for the

letter being sent. But it was very reasonable. In general Travlaw will give you free advice over the phone. If you require written advice, or indeed a letter writing, charges will usually apply.

“

**The letter that Travlaw drafted proved to be just what was needed.**

Without the help of Travlaw I would never have received the refund due to me. Being an AGTO member has many benefits. For helping me resolve a very awkward situation, being able to talk with Travlaw is certainly one of them. Thank you Travlaw!

You can contact Travlaw on 0113 258 0033.

*Eileen Booker K2006*

*Postscript: Stuart Render, who provides editorial and PR support for AGTO, also commends Travlaw. "I wanted to find out more about the Package Travel Regulations so spoke to the Travlaw team," he says. "From the start they were helpful, providing clear and concise information. If you're in any doubt about a legal situation relating to your activities as a GTO, give them a call. It could be the best call you've ever made!"*

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# 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.**

## **GTO MEMBERS** .....

S2882	David	Rouland	W2911	Tanis	Lang
E2883	Peter J	Craig	S2912	Martin	Foster
E2884	Peter	Lewinson	W2913	Richard	Swiecicki
K2885	Cheryl	Linnegar	C2914	Jamie	Lewis
K2886	Kathleen	Corfe	N2915	Christine	Waite
K2887	Pauline	North	N2916	Jean	Atherton
K2888	Tessa	Hemsley	N2917	Geoff	Baker
K2889	Sandra	Refault	N2918	Helen	Paxton
K2890	Iris	Bishop	N2919	Peter	Wilcockson
K2891	Linda Joy	Sharp	N2920	Ruth	Wilcockson
S2892	Judi	Willis	C2921	Will	Owens
S2893	Carolyn	Wildman	W2922	Angela	Baldry
S2894	Joan	Unwin	N2923	Mike	Harris
E2895	Malcolm	King	N2924	Margery	Hughes
E2896	Brenda	Copping	N2925	Yousaf	Ahmed
E2897	Carol	McCaffekty	N2926	Jeanne	Harris
E2898	Susan	Watts	S2927	Ann	Gosling
C2899	Justin	Lewis	S2928	Susan	Forbes
W2900	John	Lesser	S2929	Brenda	Maynard
W2901	Larayne	Davies	S2930	Sandra	Jenkins
E2902	Peter	Garner	S2931	Peter R	Bower
W2903	Janet	Little	S2932	Joyce C	Bright
W2904	Iris	Stone	S2933	Heather	Steere
W2905	Christine	Owen	K2934	Beccy	Baker
W2906	Jennifer	Tapp	N2935	Beryl	Smith
W2907	Eric	Smith	N2936	Hannah	Carey
W2908	Ray	Garmston	N2937	Martin A	Shaw
W2909	Rod	Mayall	K2938	David	Finch
W2910	Kevin	Little	K2939	Bernard	Dunn

## **ASSOCIATE MEMBERS** .....

### **Blenheim Palace**

Home to the 12th Duke of Marlborough and his family, and the birth place of Sir Winston Churchill, Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire is a UNESCO World Heritage Site boasting a long and diverse history. A masterpiece of Baroque architecture, with over 2,000 acres of Capability Brown parkland and 90 acres of formal gardens, Blenheim Palace provides

an awe-inspiring experience for visitors. A year-round calendar of tours, exhibitions, experiences and events reveal the sheer splendour of Britain's Greatest Palace.

[www.blenheimpalace.com](http://www.blenheimpalace.com)

### **Bodmin Jail**

From May 2020, Bodmin Jail, built in 1779, and one of Cornwall's most loved historical attractions, will



feature an £8.5million immersive visitor experience incorporating the 'Dark Walk'. The latest technology and theatrical effects will immerse visitors in 18th-century life and death within the prison walls. Ghostly voices from Cornwall's murky past will appear alongside highway robbers, smugglers and prolific former inmates; following their journeys through sentencing, life in prison, and finally the condemned cell leading to the Execution-Zone. [www.bodminjail.org](http://www.bodminjail.org)

### **Cruise and Maritime Voyages**

Cruise & Maritime Voyages (CMV) is Britain's leading independent cruise line. 2020 heralds the company's eleventh year of operating no-fly cruises from a choice of UK and Irish ports. CMV's smaller and more intimate ships, including 'Columbus', 'Magellan', 'Marco Polo', 'Vasco da Gama', 'Astor', 'Astoria' and the soon-to-be-introduced 'Amy Johnson' offer a leisurely and traditional home from home country house style of cruising with the emphasis very much on personal service and going that extra mile. [www.cruiseandmaritime.com](http://www.cruiseandmaritime.com)

### **Dramatic Heart of Wales**

Be the first to discover the Dramatic Heart of Wales, a place of extreme diversity where beauty and grit combine to form the unexpected landscape that makes up the county of Neath Port Talbot. A memorable backdrop for both high octane outdoor activity holidays and dramatic cultural and walking breaks, come and explore the region's unique rural and industrial landscapes, from mountains to coastline. Welcoming, honest and dramatically Welsh. [www.dramaticheart.wales](http://www.dramaticheart.wales)

### **Great Yorkshire Show**

The Great Yorkshire Show is an iconic three-day event in July and one of the biggest agricultural events in the English calendar. Every year, more than 130,000 visitors and over 8,500 animals converge on the Great Yorkshire Showground in Harrogate to compete, socialise and celebrate. This year's show, the 162nd, takes place from Tuesday 14 to Thursday 16 July 2020 when the best of British farming, food and the countryside will be showcased. [www.greatyorkshireshow.co.uk](http://www.greatyorkshireshow.co.uk)

### **Horatio's Garden**

Horatio's Garden is a national charity that creates and lovingly cares for six beautiful accessible gardens in NHS spinal injury centres in north London, Salisbury, Stoke Mandeville, Cardiff, Oswestry and Glasgow. Leading landscape designers have created these stunning sanctuaries.

The charity is named after Horatio Chapple, a volunteer who had the original idea of creating a garden away from the wards for patients and their families. Each garden can be visited by groups. [www.horatiogarden.co.uk](http://www.horatiogarden.co.uk)

### **Just You Holidays**

Just You has been crafting solo holidays escorted tours for over 15 years. If you have a passion for seeing the world and love the idea of sharing new experiences and making memories that will last forever, then an award-winning singles holiday escorted tours with Just You would be ideal. You'll be with like-minded people who share your passion for travel and sense of adventure, enjoying new experiences as well as having free time to explore independently. [www.justyou.co.uk](http://www.justyou.co.uk)

### **St Martin-in-the-Fields**

St Martin-in-the-Fields is the beautiful Georgian church in the north-east corner of Trafalgar Square in the centre of London. Completed in 1726 it was designed by architect James Gibbs. It features a fusion of neoclassical and baroque styles and served as a model for many wooden churches in New England, USA. The church is well known for its excellent classical music concerts, many by candlelight. [www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org](http://www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org)

### **Scenic and Emerald Waterways**

Scenic Tours offers a range of 5-star river cruises, ocean cruises and escorted tours. The luxuries you would expect to pay extra for are included, promising a journey like no other. Emerald Waterways offers a '4-star deluxe' experience. Whether you wish to cruise the beautiful rivers of Europe or further afield, with Scenic and Emerald your journey of discovery is just a click away. [www.scenic.co.uk](http://www.scenic.co.uk) / [www.emeraldwaterways.co.uk](http://www.emeraldwaterways.co.uk)

### **Travelsphere**

Travelsphere has been providing escorted touring holidays for over 50 years. From classic and relaxed touring to rail tours, safaris, river cruises and so much more, there's a huge range of guided tours that will suit every need and budget. Discover authentic local experiences that go beyond the guidebook. Sample local life, traditions and cuisine with an expert tour manager. You'll have plenty of free time to relax and explore on your own. If you love travelling and have a taste for authentic, genuine experiences and being immersed in the local culture, then travelling with Travelsphere is the perfect holiday for you. [www.travelsphere.co.uk](http://www.travelsphere.co.uk)

## Visit the **Great Yorkshire Show**

The 162nd Great Yorkshire Show, located on the edge of the spa town of Harrogate, takes place from **Tuesday 14th – Thursday 16th July 2020**.

Over 130,000 visitors and 8,500 animals flock to the Great Yorkshire Showground in Harrogate every year, making it one of the biggest in the UK.

While there's national and regional competitions in the judging rings, there's also first-class entertainment; including TV stunt performers Atkinson Action Horses performing in the Main Ring, fashion shows, music from sporting soprano Lizzie Jones and cookery demos from leading chefs including Rosemary Shrager.

Discounts and additional benefits are available for groups, when booking 15 tickets or more. Email [groups@yas.co.uk](mailto:groups@yas.co.uk) or call Sally Wall on **01423 546218** for further details.

Visit the website to find out more [www.greatyorkshireshow.co.uk](http://www.greatyorkshireshow.co.uk)



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**Contact Sally Wall on 01423 546218 or [groups@yas.co.uk](mailto:groups@yas.co.uk)**

The Great Yorkshire Show raises funds for the Yorkshire Agricultural Society to help support farming and the countryside. Company Reg No 1666751 | Reg Charity No 513238.



# 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 Chairman's Message

This is my first report as Chairman of the AGTO Central Branch following my appointment at our AGM at the AGTO Showcase Weekend in February.

Jim Barling, our previous Chairman, has had to stand down due to various reasons. He was very sorry to leave at such a crucial stage in our life but hopes we will continue to grow and flourish as part of such a wonderful organisation as AGTO. He passes his thanks to everyone for all the support he has been given during his year as Chairman.

Stuart Parker, from Dunwood Travel, has been invited to rejoin the Branch committee and we hope he will be giving us help

in organising new events in the months to come.

Getting members together from such a large geographical area has meant we were unable to run any fam trips during 2019. However, your committee is now actively planning future fam visits for later this year.

Details of an AGM to take place in October or November will be available soon and we hope as many of our members as possible will wish to attend. Even if you have visited places before it is a great opportunity to meet up and network with fellow organisers and Associate members we are able to interest in joining us.

We are still looking for fresh input

on the Branch committee and would hope that anyone that would like a taster of a meeting, without any commitment, would come along to a committee meeting and see what it involves. All reasonable expenses are paid so you will have nothing to lose but a few hours of your time.

If you would like to know more please contact me at [julia32@virginmedia.com](mailto:julia32@virginmedia.com), telephone 0115 973 0454 or contact any member of the committee.

I do hope to meet you all before too long, to share ideas, swap stories, and learn about places you have visited or hope to visit in the future.

*Julia Passmore*

## Discovering Warner's Studley Castle

by Mike Smith

Like me you probably receive a large number of e-mails that come into the inbox, excluding those in the junk/trash box. Fortunately I did not delete,

without reading, the one that arrived from Dunwood Travel advertising five days at Warner Leisure Hotel's newest property, Studley Castle.



I felt that this looked interesting and I advertised it to members of one of the military organizations we visit, who for years went to Warner's Alvaston. But with the effects of mature years it had been some time since a visit had taken place.

There was initially some interest and even deposits were paid. In the end, due to a number of reasons, only six of us made the journey, choosing to self-drive.

Studley Castle is a Grade 2 listed building, never a castle, set in 28





acres of countryside in Warwickshire. The architect, Samuel Beazley employed by Francis Lyttleton-Hoyoake, High Sheriff of Warwickshire, designed the 'Castle' in Gothic Revival style. It was completed in 1836 at a cost of £120k (£4.5 million in today's prices). For the next 70 years it was the owner's family home until bankruptcy meant it was sold. It subsequently had a range of owners and uses until Warner's took it over as their 14th hotel, spending £50 million on refurbishment. It opened for guests early in 2019.

The setting is magnificent and has sumptuous décor. Have a look online and you'll see I'm not exaggerating. The weather for our journey and visit wasn't great with flooding in our village as we left, rain on the

journey, and rain almost every day. But once we arrived it didn't matter. Apart from one day, we effectively hibernated within the luxury of the hotel. It has a large restaurant with a selection of food able to meet most appetites, having a range each night of a different national menu.

I would say that we 'clicked' with the staff to a greater degree than on previous Warner's breaks. The in-house entertainment was good but I have to admit, with such tiring

days (!) we only heard part of the visiting artistes, but heard good reports.

Surprisingly on the good day, as we departed, we met Barbara Flood who represents Warner leisure Hotels. Many will remember her from AGTO national events. We had a longish discussion talking about our stay, which may result in a few minor changes.

From these comments you can guess that we consider Studley Castle to be worth considering for personal or group visits.

*Mike Smith C1922*

## Dunwood Travel says thank you

by Stuart Parker

Around 200 group travel organisers, including AGTO members from Central Branch and other branches, joined directors and sales staff from Dunwood Travel at the start of January for the company's annual conference.

Dunwood's directors and sales staff joined the group as they boarded five of the company's bright blue coaches for a three-night, half board break at the TLH Derwent Hotel in Torquay, part of the TLH Leisure Resort Torquay. On arrival at the hotel, Dunwood directors Phil Westwood and Colin



Duncan gave a warm welcome accompanied by the TLH Leisure Resort management.

After a relaxing evening, day two brought the conference and a mini trade show. A short presentation was given regarding the company and its future plans, including the importance of booking through a bonded tour operator. Phil Westwood was also delighted to start the new year with some really exciting news regarding the award winning Dunwood coach fleet. He told guests that the company had recently taken delivery of a brand new 53-seat Scania Irizar i6s, the very first model in the UK on a 12.9m chassis which allows extra leg room. He explained that two more coaches were being delivered this year, including a second 53-seat i6s and a Scania Irizar Touring 49 seater. Colin Duncan went through the packs that were handed to us as we'd entered the

conference rooms, highlighting the range of special offers and holidays featured for 2020 and beyond.

GTOs were then invited to meet some of the well-known suppliers that had attended the mini trade show. These included AGTO Associate members Warner Leisure Hotels & Resorts, Potters, Constantinou Bros Hotels Cyprus, and West Midland Safari Park, to name but a few.

One of the highlights of the event were the Dunwood Travel Awards that took place on the Tuesday night. Management, staff and GTOs dressed up and were treated to a drinks reception followed by a Gala Dinner. GTOs were thanked for their groups business in 2019. A warm round of applause was given to Chris Tasker, a familiar face to many GTOs, when he received the award for being Dunwood's 'Best Tour Driver'. Pauline Johnson, Central

Branch magazine editor, explains why Chris' win was welcomed. "I took a group of 52 away and Chris was our driver," she says. "We were left in no doubt as to why he had won the award. At the end of the week there was a unanimous vote to ask for him for the next tour."

The following day, GTOs were taken to local Devon attractions including Buckfast Abbey, Exeter, and in Torquay itself, Babbacombe Model Village and Bygones, the wonderful visitor attraction that features three floors full of nostalgia.

Dunwood's 2021 conference will from 4 January 2021 at the newly opened Warner Leisure Hotels' Studley Castle on 4 January 2021. The three-day, half board package is priced at £159 per person and is open to bona fide GTOs and partner or friend. Why not join us?

*Stuart Parker  
- on behalf of Dunwood travel*



## Whale watching in Newfoundland

by Graham and Pam Russell

Are you looking for somewhere different to visit in Canada? Then look no further than Newfoundland.

This Canadian island, which is nearer to the UK than to Toronto, is a magical island of lakes, mountains, rivers and wildlife situated in the estuary of the St Lawrence River.

The trip we took started in Halifax, Nova Scotia and travelled north through Nova Scotia to Sydney before taking a ferry across to Newfoundland. We travelled south to north, then west to east of the island, ending our trip in St. John's.

Newfoundland was the first landing place of the Vikings in North America, and there are many Viking remains





wildlife species can be seen.

Our drive across the centre of the island from west to east took us to isolated peninsulas, through forests, and across narrow stretches of water, with lighthouses around every corner. We met the locals in pubs, clubs and restaurants, and found ourselves singing the folk songs of the area

along with those from their Scottish and Irish origins.

to be seen, in particular L'Anse aux Meadows near to St Anthony in the northern part of the island. From this area the coast of the province of Labrador is visible. The stretch of water is known as 'Iceberg Alley' as during the spring and early summer icebergs which are drifting down from the Arctic can often be seen. This area is also one of the best places to see sea mammals and birds with whale and dolphin-watching cruises leaving St Anthony every day.

One of the best hotels we stayed in was the Sinbad's Suites in Gander (the town that features in the hit West End musical 'Come from Away'). When the owner realised we were a group of English people he popped out to fetch a local resident with his two Newfie dogs to make a fuss of us, and brought the local piper back with him to play us some folk tunes.

The day we took the trip was very wet and foggy, however, despite us expecting the trip to be cancelled, the boatmen dressed us all in oilskins and wellies and out we went for a most magical cruise, seeing whales, dolphins, porpoises and all manner of sea birds including eagles.

Our last port of call was St. John's, the capital of Newfoundland. Primarily a large fishing port, it's also one of the container ports into which the goods needed by the islanders are brought.

On our way back south we drove through Gros Morne National Park, an area of walking, canoeing and rafting excursions where moose, wolves, deer and many other

The whole trip was one of the best we have taken, and the islanders were just so friendly and helpful they made our journey a really memorable one.

*Graham and Pam Russell C2761/2*

## AGTO Central Branch Committee

**Julia Passmore** - Chairman/Treasurer/AGTO Board Director  
[julia32@virginmedia.com](mailto:julia32@virginmedia.com)

**Sally Davison** - Committee Member

**Pam Russell** - Committee Member

**Jo Blair - Success Tours** - Associate Member

**Sue Day - West Midland Safari Park** - Associate Member

**Pauline Johnson** - Magazine Editor

[pauline\\_a\\_johnson@hotmail.com](mailto:pauline_a_johnson@hotmail.com)

**INTERESTED IN  
JOINING THE  
COMMITTEE?**

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

# Eastern Branch's Director's Message

Welcome to 2020 and the prospect of Spring. Looking back 2019 proved to be a challenging year for many reasons!

Yes, there were memorable people to meet and places to visit, all of which were exciting, entertaining and at times wonderful. But, as many readers will know, the underlying problem was a husband who, having had a dreadful accident at the beginning of the year, and who had joined me for all our adventures, was unaware of the care and assistance we received on our many travels throughout this time. Sadly, Roy, pictured right, caught a chill in September and passed away on 7th October 2019.

With the help of Members and Associates we managed to complete a full programme for the year. I felt it important therefore to

thank you all for your extreme care and kindness at this time. Many cards, letters and calls to see if I was coping came in vast numbers, with too many to answer individually.

I received one which I think highlights the importance of our Association and the bond we share with our enjoyment of group travel. I quote: "It is good to know you have the love of your family and friends. I have seen over the years, how people I have come to know in the world of group travel lose their partners, they then find continuing scaffolding for their lives in the important work they do in the middle of their community. It's a scaffold that will hold you while you grieve and find new feet."

What wonderful true sentiments which I will savour and cherish. I joined our wonderful association



at a travel show in Woburn at the beginning of the 2000s and know it was the best decision I ever made.

So here's to a very successful 2020 to you all – and thank you.

*Joan Hanks E1976*

## Christmas Markets and a Citadel

by Joan Hanks

In early 2019 I enjoyed a river cruise on the Meuse in Wallonia (southern Belgium) as part of a fam trip organised by Simply Groups.

The trip was well thought out, the 'MS Olympia', which is family owned, was comfortable and I loved the Wallonia scenery which was so different from Ghent, Bruges and Brussels.

On my return I was pleased to see a 2019 Christmas markets cruise advertised for November on the same ship and to the same area. I decided I must take my group so it was duly added to the schedule and 24 members signed up to go.

On the day of departure the coach arrived in good time, as did all our members. Our welcoming crew were driver Ron and his assistant Marie. We enjoyed lunch on board the ferry from Dover to Calais and were soon heading



towards our destination. Hot and cold drinks were served en-route, and with a couple of comfort stops and no delays we made good progress.

We arrived in Namur late afternoon and found the





MS Olympia waiting for us at the quayside. Greeted by the Captain and crew we booked our tables for dinner whilst our luggage was delivered to our cabins. Time for a Welcome from the Purser and the all-important safety drill then it was nearly time for dinner. We were all very hungry after our journey and the food on offer was worth the wait. In truth it was 5 stars both in content and presentation. Then off to the lounge for more drinks and chat before we all turned in for the night.

The boat was moored overnight in Namur so after the obligatory hearty breakfast we went ashore and decided to climb to the top of Namur's famous Citadel. There are 900 steps if you take the direct route but as the route was under repair we walked along the path that takes a twisting route to the top. It was really worth it, giving us time to stop and enjoy the spectacular views across the river and the city.

A giant bronze turtle with a man sitting astride it ('Searching for utopia' by artist Jan Fabre) sits by the entrance and was gleaming in the bright November sun. Refreshments were the order of the day so we stopped at the Fort Cafe at the top of the hill and had coffee and brandies. What a good way to start the day! It was of course much easier walking back down to the river to re-board our ship.

Lunch was now ready and we cast off for the start of our journey along the River Meuse. Although it was very cold the sun shone brightly all afternoon so we were able to go on deck for much of the time. Our route took us under many bridges that were so low that those of use standing on the deck had to duck.

By evening we were moored up in the centre of the city of Liège. After dinner we adjourned to the lounge where we were serenaded by a lovely musician on keyboards and guitar.

After breakfast next morning we boarded a bus for the short journey to the centre of Liège.

It was the first day of the city's Christmas Market so there was much hustle and bustle. The local mayor and his assistants were on hand to greet everyone. The funds raised for putting on the market go to the less fortunate in the town for Christmas which was a lovely idea. The stalls were full of local produce, Christmas food and wine as well as Christmas gifts and novelties. All too soon we were back to the Olympia for a late lunch.

We moved on again to Maastricht, situated just over the border in the Netherlands and our final destination on the Meuse. Once again the weather was very kind to us and wrapped up warm we stayed on deck for much of this very pleasant journey arriving late evening.

After dinner we went into the town centre to see the Christmas market. There were carousels, ice skating, lots of music and lots to eat and drink. We were all so full up from our dinner on the ship that we could hardly



manage anything to eat, although the mulled wine proved very tempting. We returned to the Olympia at nearly midnight having thoroughly enjoyed the atmosphere in town. There was just time for a nightcap before heading to bed.

Waking the next morning the weather had turned a little dreary. After breakfast we boarded a coach and headed to Valkenburg for a magical excursion, and what many readers will know is a very special Christmas market set inside the caves of this hillside town. We walked along some unremarkable cobbled streets to find, hidden unobtrusively behind a shop forecourt and cafe bar, the entrance to the caves. During the Second World War they were used as a hospital, a hideout and relief station for many allied troops. The walls are covered in wartime graffiti and beautiful paintings, some of which were very old indeed and others which the forces had done to relieve the boredom and pass away the time. It was a snapshot in time and gave a real history of the town and its troubles during that period. Endless twists and turns inside the caves revealed creative lighting highlighting beautiful craft work as well as items for Christmas. Without signs it would have been easy to get lost.

Having successfully found our way back to the street we returned to the coach and back to the Olympia for our last dinner on board.

The captain and crew entertained us with a song and one of the crew members, our head waiter, played guitar and sang. Some of our shopaholics returned into town for last minute purchases while the rest of us enjoyed each other's company for our last night together.

After breakfast the next morning we boarded our coach for the journey home, stopping on the way at the lovely old Belgian city of Tournai with its cobbled streets and wonderful buildings. Henry VIII once bought this delightful town for England and so it has many things still left from that time and some allegiances to us. A final visit to a chocolate shop for yet more treats then we got back on our coach and headed for Calais where the ferry was waiting for us to cross to Dover.

The trip was excellent, and for the itinerary, the care to detail and all the wonderful sites along the way we are indebted to our guides Ron and Marie, the captain and crew on board the 'MS Olympia' and all the staff at Simply Groups for their expertise and handling of this short break. For more information contact Shauna Potts or Joyce Spencer at Simply Groups on 01943 605999, email [info@simplygroups.co.uk](mailto:info@simplygroups.co.uk), or go to [www.simplygroups.co.uk](http://www.simplygroups.co.uk)

*Joan Hanks E1976*



## 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

The Kent Branch committee, having held its first meeting of the year, are eagerly looking forward to 2020 and have started to plan our meeting schedule.

Our aim is to provide effective 'fam' trips at a zero to low cost to our members, as well as finding attractive venues and places to visit and where our members can see what's on offer and consider taking along their own groups and clubs. During these trips we will always

try to find a suitable room in which to hold our branch meetings. I'm pleased to say that we met this aim at our February meeting visiting Greenwich for the Fan Museum and the Painted Hall. The Old Royal Navy College kindly allowed us to hold our meeting in the historic Admiral's House.

There was strong support given to the Excursions 2020 trade exhibition at Alexandra Palace in January. As a result we have

welcomed seven new members to the branch.

We are preparing ourselves to be on the AGTO stand at a number of travel shows including Saint Hill Manor and the Kent Showground in Detling. By the time you read this we will also have had a full committee turn out at the Showcase Weekend in Stratford-upon-Avon.

*Jim Silvester K2496*

## A day out in Greenwich

by Jim Silvester

When the Kent branch was invited by Siobhan Harrison of Travel Beat to visit the Old Royal Navy College's Painted Hall we felt we should make a whole day of it in Greenwich. With the help and assistance of Gyll King of City and Village Tours contact was made to visit the Fan Museum. This turned out to be a hidden gem amongst the many attractions on offer in Greenwich and is certainly worth a visit.

The museum is in a pair of Grade 2 listed townhouses constructed in 1721. There's a collection of more than 6,000 fans with an ever changing exhibition. Tea and biscuits were waiting for us in the Orangery when we arrived, followed by a welcome and introduction presented by owner Helene Alexander. The very enthusiastic curator Jacob Moss explained the history of fans and pointed out some of the special fans that make up the collection.

To find out more, contact Emma on 020 8305 1441.

For lunch we went to the Spanish Galleon, a traditional pub with original features and nautical artefacts that's situated close to the Cutty Sark and famous for its fish and chips. I can report the fish and chips were excellent and well worth including in an itinerary. For details, contact Sam on 020 8858 3664.

Our afternoon branch meeting was held in the





wonderful Admiral's House inside the Old Royal Navy College. Afterwards we enjoyed a tour of the site including the magnificent Painted Hall and a Cream Tea back in the Admiral's House. Contact Francesca at the ORNC on 020 8269 4721.

I'd like to thank Grange Travel for providing a cost-effective solution to "parking in Greenwich" by picking us up in Bluewater in the morning in its double deck coach and returning us in the late afternoon. Contact Ruth at Grange on 01474 357743.

*Jim Silvester K2496*

## Tea and cake and a Bournemouth break

by Jim Silvester

Thanks to the assistance, help and generosity of Rosie and Jane from the Marsham Court Hotel in Bournemouth the Kent branch had a full programme of events for its annual late autumn break.

Having travelled to the south coast we were welcomed on arrival with tea, coffee and fruit cake, followed by a tour of the hotel seeing the facilities and a look at some of the newly decorated bedrooms. In the evening a drinks reception was

followed by dinner in a private dining room with representatives from Bournemouth Tourism, Swanage Railway, City Cruises, Yellow Coaches and the Russell-Cotes Museum.

The following day, Saturday, was a full complimentary programme with Yellow Coaches taking 34 members on a tour of Bournemouth, Sandbanks and Poole before we embarked on a splendid and interesting Poole Harbour Tour

with City Cruises along with commentary, and more tea and cake. We then boarded the coach to travel to Swanage for a return steam train journey to Norden, near Corfe Castle. Back at the hotel and dinner was excellent as well as the entertainment.

Sunday was more relaxing with a guided tour of the Russell-Cotes Museum and a walking visit to the Christmas Tree Wonderland and Alpine Market. [Cont'd p31...]







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Later, a quiz was open to all guests and won by two Kent members, Patricia Speakman and Sheila O'Neill, and their husbands. Before departing home to Kent we visited the RNLI training college in Poole for a very interesting guided tour.

If you'd like to know more about Marsham Court Hotel, contact Nicki Allan, sales and events manager, on 01202 446644, or go to [www.marshamcourthotel.co.uk](http://www.marshamcourthotel.co.uk). For more information about City Cruises call Hayley Johnson on 020 3874 0192.

*Jim Silvester K2496*



## A spot of REAL Socialising by Viv Kelly

They say that when one door shuts another one opens. That was certainly the case for me when redundancy loomed after eight years working as Ashford Town Centre Manager, a very involved role working with the business community and managing town-wide initiatives and events such as the annual Christmas Light Switch-on, music festivals and themed markets.

Prior to life in Town Centre Management one of my most enjoyable roles was organising the social activity for a 1,000-strong manufacturing based workforce. So, whilst preparing for redundancy I was spurred on to go back to my social organising roots and do something about it. And so I started my 'hobby job', forming 'REAL Socialising'.

2019 was a bumper year, visiting Paris on Eurostar, with trips to Venice, Rome and Malta along with numerous other short breaks and days out. As we entered 2020 there were a number of trips already fully booked, so I've been kept busy planning new things and new places to visit. Currently on the calendar we have weekend visits to Ghent and Bruges, a Reims Champagne Weekend, four-day tours to Wales and Cornwall, a four-day trip to Amsterdam and a six-day Rhine cruise. Days out include

Brussels Carpet of Flowers and Camden and a Canal Cruise, to name just a few. I like to find unique things to visit and one of those is the PanoramaXXL 360° Experience in Rouen. It looks amazing.

Wearing a number of volunteering hats, I am Trustee for The Shorncliffe Trust, a Heritage and Education Charity. Shorncliffe can truly be called the birthplace of the modern British army under Sir John Moore. His Earth Redoubt remains in woodland next to the army garrison along with heritage assets including First World War training trenches dug by the Canadian Expeditionary Forces. Our heritage interpreters give an immersive tour of the former training land, covering 300 years of history. The tour ends at the tranquil Shorncliffe Military Cemetery where so many remain to this day following conflict in both World Wars and stretching back from the time of the Indian Mutiny through to modern-day conflict. If you have an interest in these types of guided heritage tours and would like to know more than please get in touch by email at: [community@shorncliffe-trust.org.uk](mailto:community@shorncliffe-trust.org.uk)

*Viv Kelly K2515*

# Gerry's march on London

by Gerry March

Gerry March of Nights Out is one of Kent branch's most active GTOs running many day trips and holidays throughout the year. Over the festive season he took his members into London for two wonderful shows. Firstly, on two different nights, two full coaches headed

up to the West End to see the annual pantomime at the London Palladium. This year it was the turn of 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears' starring Paul O'Grady, Julian Clary, Nigel Havers and Gary Wilmot, plus some amazing circus acts.

The second visit was to Sadler's Wells Theatre for Matthew Bourne's production of 'The Red Shoes'. Matthew Bourne is well known for delivering a modern twist to traditional ballet, and the show lived up to that expectation with fabulous dance routines, spectacular costumes and humour. Those members new to ballet have now been converted and are already looking forward to this year's performance of The Nutcracker.

For details about performances at Sadler's Wells Theatre go to [www.sadlerswells.com](http://www.sadlerswells.com)

*Gerry March K2449*



## Getting together on Teapot Island

by Jim Silvester

This year's Christmas Social get-together was on Teapot Island, a teapot museum located in Yalding in Kent. The museum grew from the personal teapot collection of owner Sue Blazye (pictured), which started when her grandmother gave her a teapot in 1983. This encouraged other family members and friends to do the same. Today, there are more than 8,200 on display, and more than 2,000 for sale. Unsurprisingly, this makes Teapot Island the largest collection of teapots in the country. After enjoying the teapots our members enjoyed a festive lunch at The Boathouse, a recently renovated pub and restaurant that sits on the banks of the River Medway.

For more information, go to [www.teapotisland.co.uk](http://www.teapotisland.co.uk) and [www.boathouseyalding.co.uk](http://www.boathouseyalding.co.uk)

*Jim Silvester K2496*





# Out and About with Jim

**Kent branch chairman Jim Silvester takes a frank look at some of the shows he's seen and the places he's visited on fam trips over the last few months.**



In November I joined Marilyn and 40 members of my group to see the Bee Gees 'You Win Again' at the Orchard Theatre in Dartford. A super show celebrating the rise and songs of the Bee Gees. Well worth tracking it down in 2020.

I went with Marilyn to see 'Curtains' at the Orchard Theatre. The show, starring comedian Jason Manford, was billed as a musical mystery comedy farce. Sad to say, it failed to impress.

In December, 75 members of my group descended on the Princes Stadium, home to Dartford FC, for our festive lunch. A spacious room, nice food and very friendly staff.

40 members enjoyed the Thursford Christmas Spectacular in Norfolk (above left). We stopped overnight at the Links Country Park Hotel between Cromer and Sheringham.

Back to the Orchard Theatre in Dartford in January to



see 'Bodyguard The Musical' and an absolutely tingling performance from Alexander Burke portraying the Whitney Houston role and all of her hit songs.

Last but not least for this round-up we headed to Warner Leisure Hotels Sinah Warren on Hayling Island in Hampshire (above right) for a weekend break that included an Everly Brothers tribute act. The venue and the entertainment was first-class.

*Jim Silvester K2496*

## AGTO Kent Branch Committee

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

### 2020 MEETINGS FOR KENT BRANCH

#### **April (tbc)**

Day trip to Calais

#### **Friday 10 June**

Biggin Hill Memorial and Down House

#### **6 or 8 October**

Canterbury Tales and AGM

#### **20 to 23 November**

Daish's County Hotel, Kendal

#### **10 December**

Christmas get-together at Eastwell Manor

# Northern Branch's Chairman's Message

Summer is fast approaching and we're all starting to make final preparations for a hopefully busy season. Our Northern Branch AGM was held at the AGTO Showcase Weekend and sadly, Jennifer Robinson, our Chair, has stepped down. We also lost committee members Bob Walker due to time constraints and Ray Howarth due to ill health.

So, into the breach step I, John Flynn, as acting chair until a replacement can be found. Volunteers and nominations are welcome. This is your association; we need to hear from you.

Previous events have not been well supported by our members. If we are not providing what you want then please let us know what you do want and we will do our best

to accommodate any requests. If there's anywhere you would like to visit, let us know and we will do our best to organise a fam visit or branch meeting. Maybe other members from other AGTO branches would be interested too.

So, here's to a positive future and we look forward to hearing from you.

*John Flynn N2477  
Acting Chair*

## The largest bell foundry in the world

by Bob Walker

The John Taylor & Co bell foundry in Loughborough is a hidden gem. Your group will be treated to a one-and-a-half-hour tour of the foundry and museum and be able to see first-hand how Britain's oldest bell maker goes about its work.

The current company continues a line of bell founding which has been unbroken since the middle of the 14th century when Johannes de Stafford was active only 10 miles from the present site. From 1784 the business was operated by members of the Taylor family, moving to its present position in Loughborough in 1879. Today

it operates the largest bell foundry in the world.

Centuries of experience, together with the latest advances in technology, has put Taylors at the forefront in the design and manufacture of bells, their fittings and frameworks. The company produces single bells, peals of bells, chimes and carillons, together with sets of musical handbells and other small bells for customers worldwide.

Whilst virtually all other bell founders now cast their bells using self-setting sand moulds, Taylors still makes







its bell moulds from the more labour intensive loam process, a process used by bell founders for centuries past. The making of the moulds takes a considerable amount of time as each layer is dried in a kiln overnight before the next is added, with all inscriptions and decoration being pressed into the final layer of wet loam as the mould is completed. Although this is more costly, the use of loam is a vital factor in producing the sweet toned bells for which the foundry is known. Following traditional methods, the company still digs a pit for each bell and buries the moulds in the earth of the foundry floor before casting. With the introduction of immensely strong cast iron bell cases in the 19th century, most bell founders abandoned the burying process as a way of saving time and money. However, Taylors says that it is convinced that allowing the bell to cool slowly in the earth over a period of days gives a better molecular structure, and a better sounding bell. It seems that customers agree.



The tour includes an introductory talk and video along with free time in the museum. The museum doesn't have catering facilities, so this needs to be factored in if you decide to visit.

Overall an interesting and very different place to visit, and well worth considering as part of a Leicester and Leicestershire itinerary.

For more information, go to [www.taylorbells.co.uk](http://www.taylorbells.co.uk)

*Bob Walker N1082*

## In search of witches and the battle bed!

by Derek Redfern

A rather damp and misty Friday afternoon saw AGTO members from across the country descend on the Mercure Preston Samlesbury Hotel in Lancashire for a fam trip organised by Northern branch.

The hotel, perfectly situated off Junction 31 of the M6, made access easy for members arriving by car, train and taxi for the early afternoon start. The hotel's 80 bedrooms had recently received a refurbishment with new 'Walk-in Rainfall Showers' and other improvements really

meeting member's expectations. After a chat in the bar over a coffee and sandwich Pam Wharton from AGTO Associate member Ellen Smith was soon inviting the group to board one of her luxury coaches.

A short ride away was Samlesbury Hall, the first of many sites to visit in our packed weekend of activities around Lancashire.

What would we discover, I wondered as we headed into the car and coach park? I knew it is one of the stunning

stately homes of Lancashire, a haven for history lovers, where the past meets the present, witches reside, there's no charge to enter the Hall and grounds, and guided tours are also readily available.

What could be more exciting than being met by 'Janey' our very own local witch residing in the dim dusty confines of this historic Elizabethan Hall. Janey is no ordinary witch, she is one of three witches who were accused of witchcraft and sent to Lancaster Castle for trial.

However circumstances were such that evidence produced by the prosecution failed to prove their guilt and they were released from prison and free to return to the hall. Our luck was in, as Janey was an admirable guide who was overflowing with the history of Samlesbury Hall.

Only too pleased to pass her knowledge on to us mere 21st-century travellers, who were in awe of her dialogues, especially about Father Robert and Sister Pamela's connectivity and the Priest Holes? A visit is a must if you wish to learn more and I assure you disappointment is not on this agenda.

Carl, our coach driver, was waiting for our departure, ready to whisk us back to the hotel for a committee meeting, a refreshing shower and evening meal with superb service.

Saturday morning greeted us with the usual Pendle Hill (Home of the Pendle Witches) euphemism: "If you can't see Pendle it's raining, but if you can it's going to rain!"

Well we couldn't see Pendle so guess what, that's right, it was raining. The bright side was the

comfortable Ellen Smith charabanc awaiting for departure. Off we popped to Barton Grange Marina for a trip on 'Kingfisher', a wide-bodied canal boat nicely fitted out with benches and tables sporting huge jam and cream scones, accompanied with either tea or coffee.

Canal, railway and motorway all fight for Lancashire countryside and for leisurely travel nothing beats the experience. It was enjoyed by everyone and we all thought it was one we would return to with our own groups in the near future.

A quick look into the Barton Grange Garden Centre within a short walk in the marina and we were on our way to Oswaldtwistle Mills for a lunch of toasted sandwiches with a hot bowl of soup, washed down with a drink to wet the whistle. Yes, it was still raining, but your intrepid Northern branch travellers, with a few Welsh friends in the party, set off for a guided tour of Lancashire's villages and beauty spots suitable for group visits.

Although the weather was the usual damp and misty offering we managed to get a good impression of all that was on offer in this

county. Appearing out of the mist after trundling along narrow lanes was the magnificent splendour of 'Stonyhurst College', a Roman Catholic Independent School adhering to the Jesuit tradition, and a building that must be a breathtaking view on a clear day.

Clitheroe, a local market town overlooked by its canon ball-marked castle with its splendid main street and bustling market stalls, caught our eye as we negotiated its busy streets on our way onward.

Up hill and down dale brought us to the village of Sabden, which had cultivated a considerable body of folklore about local treacle mining in the 1930s. Obviously being a Saturday we weren't able to visit a Treacle Mine, but I'm sure it will be a weekday next time we visit Sabden to chat with the Treacle Miners.

Oswaldtwistle Mills was our final destination for the day and I must say many members managed to get quite a bit of their Christmas shopping done. It was smiles all around on returning to the coach for the short trip to the Mercure, dinner, a visit to the bar, and bed.

Sunday morning found the







members exiting the hotel after enjoying a full English breakfast into a 'Pea Soup Mist', a speciality of the county of Lancashire. A short trip up the M6 past Lancaster's impressive skyline saw the sun appear and the mist evaporate. Even tighter country lanes tested our driver, but as expected Ellen Smith drivers are up for any challenge the county can throw at them. We finally exiting a tree-covered lane to view the unbelievable sight of Leighton Hall bathed in bright autumn sunlight at the end of a long driveway.

Owned by Mr and Mrs Richard Gillow Reynolds, Leighton Hall continues to improve and be renovated by the family as in the past. We were met by Susie, Richard's wife, whose welcome was warmer than words could ever describe. It's a home still lived in by the family, which becomes very obvious from the very start of the visit. If one visits Lancashire, Leighton Hall should be top of the list of places to visit as it's an

experience one will never ever get to enjoy anywhere else in the UK.

The history of Leighton Hall as told by Susie came alive with each word and with each room having its own story to tell of bygone days. The magic of the tour was in the knowledge that the family still use each room on a daily basis so expect to see the unexpected. The 'Battle Bed' really brought the group to its knees with the ensuing mirth shared by all present. All good times must come to an end though and soon Susan was waving us off from the front entrance as we made our departure.

Our final visit was to Carnforth Station, where the award-winning Heritage Centre located within a busy working railway station proved to be our destination. The 'Brief Encounter' exhibition, which is dedicated to the classic 1945 David Lean film and its connection to the station, was the motivator for the visit. However, there was

so much happening that our short visit failed to allow our travellers to see everything on offer. That often seems to be the case with fam trips so no surprise there!

Our coach was again waiting our departure, and after a short talk and farewell by one of the volunteers about what Carnforth Station had to offer for groups, we were soon on our way. With some of the group having to travel quite some distance, Pam was eager to get us back to the Mercure on time, so hey ho the M6 once again saw us heading south to the 'Tickle Trout' junction.

Thanks must go to all the agencies involved in making the trip possible and such a success. Special thanks must go to Pam Wharton and Ellen Smith (sponsor) for organising and conducting a most successful AGTO Northern Branch familiarisation trip for 2019. Thank you!

*Derek Redfern - N2239*

## AGTO Northern Branch Committee

**John Flynn** - Acting Chairman

**Avril Redfern** - Treasurer

**TBA** - Secretary

**Hazel Jones** - Committee Member

# Southern Branch's Chairman's Message

The AGTO Showcase Weekend and is always an enjoyable event, especially for networking with Associates and fellow GTOs, and this year was no exception. Thanks to the team for all their organisation on our behalf. It was great fun to have a 1920s theme to the Saturday evening Gala Dinner.

Since the last magazine, Southern branch has had two especially successful events. Our AGM in October was held in Arundel courtesy of the WWT Wetlands Centre, where we had a lovely meeting room with views of the lakes and wildlife – a pleasant

distraction! This was well attended and some of us enjoyed a guided tour after the meeting, whilst other members explored Arundel with its castle and all it has to offer to tourists. For groups, it is also in easy reach to Chichester Cathedral, the South Downs and an Elizabethan Mansion, Parham House.

In November, we had a familiarisation stay at Warners, Cricket St. Thomas. 35 members attended this and we were pleased to welcome some from other AGTO branches. Everyone enjoyed their stay and several made bookings for their groups. As group organisers

we do have to visit places out of the main seasons when planning for our groups, but more often than not, the weather does not deter us! We are now looking forward to our next branch meeting on 20 April at the British Airways i360 on Brighton seafront. Yes, the viewing tower does also have a meeting room and a very nice cafe where we are having a two-course lunch after our meeting.

You can read more about all of these trips and events on the following pages.

*Sue Povey - S1972*

## A flying visit to Arundel Wetland Centre by Anne Barnes

The meeting room at the Arundel Wetland Centre in West Sussex has a wonderful view of the castle and the lake, so it was no surprise that some of our members were a little distracted during the Southern Branch AGM held last September.

On our guided walk of the lakes, marshes and waterways we learned of the history of the founding of the Wetlands centres by Peter Scott, the son of Antarctic explorer Captain Scott.

Peter was an Olympic sailing medallist and a well-known painter and broadcaster. He created the IUCN red list which measures whether species are threatened or endangered. He was the founding chair of WWF – he even drew their famous panda logo.

Peter particularly loved the wild open marshes of Britain and the mysterious geese that visited from unknown shores. He started as a wildfowler and learned to protect first the birds, and then their wetland habitats.



In 1946 he set up the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust at Slimbridge as a centre for science and conservation. Uniquely at the time, he opened it to the public so that anyone could enjoy getting close to nature.

Peter and his family presented the BBC's first live television wildlife programmes from his artist's studio





overlooking the lakes at Slimbridge, from where he brought a love for the British countryside into millions of homes.

WWT grew from strength to strength during Peter's life, and since his death in 1989. Each year a million people visit the nine Wetland Centres in the UK, with the WWT undertaking more research and conservation projects around the world than ever.

We visited one of the most comfortable hides I have ever seen, with soft armchairs, colourful decor and huge windows. We learned about the conservation projects and when an endangered bird lays eggs they are taken by 'egg ambulance' to Slimbridge where they are hatched and monitored in special incubators.

Groups of 12 or more enjoy an extensive range of benefits including generously discounted group admission rates, a free familiarisation trip and free on-the-day entry for the group organiser, plentiful free coach and minibus parking very near to the entrance,

free entry for the coach driver and free refreshments (for groups of more than 24), a selection of special group catering packages (please pre-book), and a range of publicity materials to help advertise your trip. WWT Arundel is a fully accessible site with disabled pick-up and drop-off zones, a range of accessible hides, and wheelchairs and 3three-wheeled rollators for visitors to borrow. Last but not least is the range of talks, tours and special events.

The WWT staff recommended that your groups be granted free time in Arundel, not just to visit the castle, but to admire the Cathedral, the multitude of art and antique shops and perhaps go for afternoon tea.

One of the Southern Branch members recommended an overnight stay or two as there are many attractions of interest to groups such as stately homes, vineyards, Bignor Roman Villa, Amberley Museum and Heritage Centre, Tangmere Military and Aviation Museum and hiking trails along the South Downs.

*Anne Barnes S2023*



## Tractor tour is highly recommended

by Richard Moore

**It's not an obvious choice for a group visit, but Richard Moore highly recommends taking a closer look at the New Holland tractor manufacturing plant in Basildon in Essex. He takes up the story.**

I took a small group of my members

to visit the state-of-the-art factory. The tour started at 12.30pm (to fit in with their shifts) and lasted until just after 3pm. We started in the showroom which has a selection of all different size tractors plus combine harvesters. We were allowed to sit in the driver seats

and have a close look at these magnificent machines.

We then had coffee and biscuits before we went into the theatre for a talk on the history of the New Holland tractors, with slides showing the progress of the factory. After

this we all had to put on yellow jackets and safety glasses and were given wireless audio guides that allowed our guide to talk to us.

Inside the factory we enjoyed a very interesting tour watching how parts arrived and following the assembly line right through to the finished product. The whole tour was excellent and well organised.

I would recommend a small group of 15/16 as a large group would be difficult to manage. The cost is £150 for a group of 15 plus extra for tea and coffee. There's a Tesco Extra café only 10-minutes-drive away with on-site coach parking that I'd

recommend for brunch. If you're looking for somewhere different to visit, I highly recommend this fascinating attraction.

To find out more, contact Amy Quarrel on 01268 292403.

*Richard Moore S2167*



## I'm 'To the Manor Born' by Jackie Ring

At the end of November 35 AGTO members and guests had a very enjoyable weekend at Warner's Cricket St Thomas in Somerset.

For me it will always be best known as 'Grantleigh Manor' the setting for the TV series To The Manor Born. Although this was filmed over 30 years ago, the older part of the manor house still felt as though we were in the home of Audrey fforbes-Hamilton (Penelope Keith). The story focused on her not accepting that Richard DeVere (Peter Bowles) had moved in to her old house – he had made his money from 'trade' – but he was to later

become her husband.

On a guided tour we also learnt more of the history of the house and grounds. Although originally built as a private house, it had also been a safari park and home to another famous resident, Mr Blobby, while he lived here at Crinkley Bottom.

Evidence of Cricket's past could be seen around the grounds and also in pictures and photographs in the manor house. The tour was given by a very informative local guide who had worked there for quite a few

decades so knew a lot of stories – she also showed us around some of the historic bedrooms which can be booked by guests.

Warner took over the estate in 1999 adding the bedrooms, dining room, entertainment and leisure facilities. During our weekend we were given a drinks reception and met the staff, with a presentation on this and their other properties.

There's always a wide choice of things to do at all Warner's properties – you can do as much or as little as you like. During the day there are things to do at set times, including quizzes, musical





bingo, dance lessons, archery, bowls competitions, and films, or demonstrations of make-up or wine tasting. You can also use the extensive leisure facilities which include a swimming pool and sauna, or book yourself a treatment. Breakfast and dinner is included – this is usually a self-service buffet with a wide choice of dishes to suit all tastes, as well as some which are served to your table.

After the evening meal, there's entertainment which you can go to if you wish. The headline act will be something different each night; while we were there we had a tribute to Michael Bublé, a soul singer and the excellent Warner entertainment team performing a selection of the Jackson's music. If you want to stay up later, the entertainment continues with a disco, or for something quieter, there's usually a singer in the bar.

When I take my group to Warner's (which I do a lot), we 'do our own thing' in smaller groups during the day and maybe go for a walk or visit a nearby place of interest. You're near to the border with Dorset with easy access to Lyme Regis, the Seaton Tramway and a number of National Trust properties and gardens. It's nice though to enjoy meals together and sort out what we're doing, and to talk over what we've done that day.

Some groups go in a coach and organise visits during their stay depending on the interests of their members. In the evenings, you may prefer to do something quieter – my group usually have a couple of packs of cards with them and sometimes find a quiet room and play bridge or a word game of some sort. All guests can enjoy the communal rooms in the old part of the house which tend to be quieter, if you want to relax or read. In the summer there are activities outside, maybe a lunch time barbecue and some music. We find it's especially relaxing to enjoy a pre-dinner drink in the gardens as the sun goes down – all very sociable.

Warner now has 14 properties around the country, ranging from coastal villages set near to the sea, and perhaps with chalets in the grounds, to coastal resorts that are more modern.



The company's historic houses are always centred around an old house of character with many links to the past. For instance, Henry VIII met Jane Seymour at Littlecote House, and the US Air Force used the house and grounds as a base for their Parachute Regiment during World War II, with flights taking off from the nearby airfield on the eve of D-Day.

All of Warner's bedrooms are very comfortable and decorated to a high standard, some with a patio or a balcony. You can request a bath or shower if you prefer, accessible rooms are available, and almost all floors have a lift. Some Warner properties are also able to offer a lunch for groups so you can visit on a day trip if that suits your members.

We had an excellent visit and we'd like to thank Barbara and Sarah Goldsbrough for hosting the fam weekend for us.

Please speak to Barbara Flood at Warner Leisure Hotels if you would like to find out more or to make a group reservation. If you are flexible on dates or venue, she will be able to advise you on the best prices and availability. You can contact her on 0330 100 9772 or email [barbara.flood@bourne-leisure.co.uk](mailto:barbara.flood@bourne-leisure.co.uk)

*Jackie Ring S2221*

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## Join us for a flight above Brighton

by Jackie Ring

If you've ever wondered what it might be like to take a flight on the British Airways i360 in Brighton, AGTO's Southern Branch is giving you the opportunity to find out.

On Monday 20 April, we will be holding our Southern

Branch meeting at the i360. If you're not familiar with this remarkable piece of design and engineering, the i360 is a 531ft observation tower on Brighton's seafront. From the fully-enclosed viewing pod, visitors experience 360-degree views across Brighton, the South Downs, the English Channel and,



flight crew will point out landmarks and answer any questions. The pod is heated and air-conditioned to ensure year-round comfort and it is fully accessible for wheelchair users. There are also seats should you simply wish to relax. A viewing map is available and a multi-lingual app can be downloaded before you board.

In the afternoon there's an opportunity to visit the Royal Pavilion, known as the Brighton Pavilion, a Grade I listed former royal residence in the centre of the town. This was originally a modest 18th century lodging house, but transformed by George, Prince of Wales, later to become Prince Regent, from his humble seaside retreat into a handsome neo-classical villa and pleasure palace. The design can only be described as extravagant and opulent, Regency grandeur with the visual style of India and China. As well as the stunning different rooms there's currently a special exhibition on loan from the Queen of decorative works of art that were originally

commissioned by the Prince Regent for the Royal Pavilion.

Brighton also offers other places to visit so this will be a good opportunity for you to have a look around the town with a view to bringing your groups back.

We would like to thank AGTO Associates Leela D'Arcy from British Airways and Lucy Cheffy from Brighton Royal Pavilion and Museums for hosting our Branch.

The cost for the day is £15 per person. This includes tea/coffee on arrival, a two-course lunch, flight on the i360 and entrance ticket to the Royal Pavilion. A three-course lunch option is available for £19 per person.

For further information and a booking form contact Jackie Ring, Southern Branch Secretary on 01483 824450 or email [ring\\_jackie@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:ring_jackie@yahoo.co.uk) The deadline for bookings is 2 April.

*Jackie Ring S2221*

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## Superb entertainment at Brick Lane

by Sylvia Adams

Having sold all the tickets, 30 members and guests set off from the Meadhurst club in Sunbury, Surrey on 22 November 2019 to tackle the tricky journey to the Brick Lane Music Hall in Silvertown in far off 'o2 land'.

Travelling east (and following a star) we journeyed to see 'Vincent's Jinglebell Christmas!', a wonderful festive show performed by some very talented and entertaining artistes, complete with afternoon tea.

Our journey to Docklands took in many of London's landmarks, passing the likes of Twickers, the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey, The Shard, the Tower

of London and the Emirates Air Line cable car across the Thames, all beautifully illuminated on the return journey.

Then on with the show, hosted by the very talented and experienced Vincent Hayes MBE. He not only had the audience rocking with laughter but also his fellow artists, several times bringing the show to a halt with fits of giggles, especially as a Filipino ship's waiter. There were lots of Christmas-themed acts, singing and comedy and a very talented violinist extraordinaire, Victoria Yellop (who has played with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra) gaining rapturous applause on two occasions.



Two very good medleys of Christmas songs by the supporting cast, both individually and collectively, entertained us throughout with an outstanding finale bringing tears of joy to everyone.

A delightful, plentiful afternoon tea with teas and coffee was served during the interval. Later in the show two of our members won prizes in the charity raffle, and I was presented with flowers for bringing along our group, a very nice thought. Thank you. We will be back.

*Sylvia Adams S2322*



## Sylvia recommends...the 'Walkie Talkie'

by Sylvia Bliss



I took a group of 50 of our members to the Sky Garden which is at the top of 20 Fenchurch Street in the City of London, a building better known as the 'Walkie Talkie' because of its unique shape. I cannot recommend it enough. It is a unique experience. Every one of my group said how much they enjoyed it and that they would return with family or friends. The views were wonderful. I personally thought that they were better than those you get at The View from The Shard, and the gardens can be enjoyed with seating dotted all around. Entrance is free, but you have to

book in advance. As an added bonus you can spend as much time as you wish there.

I would also publicly like to thank Katie Lewis-Davies of Leisuretime (AGTO Associate member) for her exceptional help with finding us a Turkey and Tinsel break when we had been let down by another company at the last minute last November! We all had a fabulous time, thanks to her; she couldn't do enough to help us. This is a company to keep in mind when arranging your breaks away with your groups. Thank you Katie.

*Sylvia Bliss S2408*

### AGTO Southern Branch Committee

**Sue Povey** - Chairman

**Anne Barnes** - Treasurer

**Jackie Ring** - Secretary

**Pat Lake, Sylvia Adams** - Committee Members

**Wendy Savage** - Co-opted Committee Member

# Western Branch's Chairman's Message

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 AGTO

Board representative. The Western committee has been informed and Gill Brooker our Secretary is seeking a Western Branch member to fill this role. It is an interesting, rewarding and crucial link with the AGTO National Committee. In the meantime I will continue to liaise between the branch and AGTO.

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

Western Branch Summer fam trip and meeting at Chavenage, near Tetbury in Gloucestershire on 20 June 2020. You can read more about this on the following pages.

The Western Branch AGM will be held at the Metropole Hotel and Spa in Llandrindod Wells from 10 to 15 November. More details will be in the next edition of Western Ways.

*Roger Sims W2388*

## Summer 2020 visit to Chavenage

by Martin Gibson

AGTO Western Branch's summer fam visit takes place on Saturday 20 June to Chavenage in Gloucestershire, and all members are invited.

Chavenage, near Tetbury, is a wonderful Elizabethan house and 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 made arrangements with Caroline, the manager of Chavenage and elder daughter of the owners, for a FAM visit with a guided tour followed by a buffet lunch organised by Joanna, Caroline's younger sister. The tour gives details of the history of the house and the two families that have lived at Chavenage since the reign of Elizabeth I.



The itinerary includes a meet and greet at 10.30am with tea, coffee and biscuits followed by a guided tour that will show what Chavenage can offer for groups. The buffet lunch will be followed by the Western Branch meeting and an opportunity to buy items on show. The trip ends around 2.45pm giving time to visit nearby Tetbury.

The cost for all of this is £16 for AGTO members and £18 for non-members and guests. For more information and to request a booking form, call Martin Gibson (W1231) on 01626 773503.

## Western Branch heads north

by Heather Taylor

A few of us from Western Branch decided we would like to join the Northern Branch FAM weekend. After contacting Bob Walker of

Northern, four of us booked to go. However, with members travelling from Devon and Cardiff, and with a rendezvous time at the hotel near

Preston at 1pm on a Friday, we realised that with the vagaries of the M5 and M6 we may have had problems. As a result we decided



to travel north on the Thursday and Bob very kindly made arrangements with the hotel for the four of us to have one night's extra half board.

Martin and Lorraine Gibson came to Cardiff on the Wednesday afternoon from Teignmouth. We all left together on the Thursday, taking the A roads as far as junction 19 of the M6. In hindsight, choosing to avoid the Friday for the journey proved to be a sensible decision.

The Mercure Samlesbury Hotel sits around a mile east of junction 31 of the M6 making it an ideal location for groups. The hotel has had a major make over and we were pleased to find the bathrooms in our bedrooms had proper walk-in showers that have replaced those awful showers over the baths with a plastic curtain which always manages to wrap itself around you!

We had a leisurely evening with an excellent meal in the restaurant. The staff we met were very friendly and 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 and guests started arriving, and most had a warm drink and some lunch.

For this trip, 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 on school trips going back to the 1960s! So, a bit of nostalgia to add to the fam trip. Pam came around to introduce herself to our group.

And so the fam trip began and



we had a lovely time visiting many places I'd heard of but not visited before. On the Friday afternoon we visited Samlesbury Hall which was about five minutes from the hotel. This is an excellent place to take a group that's interested in history. Around Halloween, and at other times, you can meet 'Janey', the local witch. She was excellent and very funny, but woe betide you if you upset her! After a drink and 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 and then a little time at Barton Grange Garden Centre. From there we headed to Oswaldtwistle Mills for lunch. The soup and sandwich provided with a hot drink was very good and 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 and 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 with a fantastic drive down to the house. We thoroughly enjoyed our visit and were pleased to see it is still a family home and that 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 and 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, and Steamtown Railway Museum. I had wanted to see where 'Brief Encounter' had been filmed. Sadly in 1973 it was more or less derelict.

But what a wonderful place the Station Tea Room is now.

Unfortunately, because time was tight, many people had to make a decision about having lunch or to have 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. Book in advance and avoid 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 and 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. Last but not least, Phil and I would also like to thank Martin for being our driver from Cardiff to Lancashire and back.

*Heather Taylor W1008*

## Willow and Wetlands in the West Country

by Heather Taylor



It was over 30 years ago that Cardiff-based Wales & Midlands Travel Club had their last visit to Coates English Willow in Somerset. After a recce in February 2019 we decided it was time to visit again so at the beginning of October, 40 of us set off from south east Wales. 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.

Coates English Willow 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. At the heart of the site is the Willows & Wetlands Visitor Centre.

A buffet lunch had been booked for 12.30pm and as we were classed as a large group it took place in the Visitor centre's conference room. We had an excellent lunch provided by the Lemon Tree Coffee House. All the quiches and pies were homemade and for anyone with special dietary needs their meals had been booked in advance.

After lunch the group were split into two groups. The first group was given a guided tour to find out how willow



is processed and to watch the basket weavers making all sorts of willow goods.

The second group had time to visit the Basket Museum and shop, and the central Courtyard which is home to a group of individual shops, before their turn on the guided tour.

About 10 minutes into the second tour the rain arrived! However, because we'd arrived early we were able to leave early for our return journey, rather than walking around in the rain!

But regardless of the weather we all had a wonderful

day, and enjoyed the lunch before the excellent guided tour and shopping.

I'd like to thank Ellie Tee at Coates for helping me to arrange the visit and guided tour of Coates, to Jeff Dale and the staff from the Lemon Tree Coffee House for our lovely lunch, and finally Gareth, our coach driver from Mainline Travel.

One last piece of advice. To find Coates from the M5, you need junction 25 and then follow the signs.

*Heather Taylor W1008*

## A very special moment of remembrance

**Helen Sims of Western branch organised a rather special visit to the Netherlands in October for members of the Stuart Singers choir. In this report, three of her group tell the moving story of a visit that turned out to be not just a holiday, but so much more.**

Fear, excitement and pouring rain – our trip to Venray had begun. It was 4.45am and very dark. After 12 months planning and many conversations, we found ourselves packed and sitting on a Rover coach heading to Dover. Stopping at services for breakfast (second for some of us) and still only around 8am, 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 – six cases – all good!

The crossing from Dover was slow, grey and lumpy but didn't really take long – about an hour and a half. 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 soon after 6pm. 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.

*Report by Helen Salisbury, Soprano*



## FREEDOM CONCERT Saturday 19 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 Netherlands' 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 finale 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.

*Report by Paul Hayward, Bass*

## 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 Graves 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 piper, 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. 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 microphone and read part of a poem before laying his flowers. At 107 years old, he was an inspiration to us all. Those of us feeling a bit sorry for ourselves as we sat for over two 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 six 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.

*Report by Charlie Wise, Tenor*



## 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

**Vacancy** - AGTO Board Member

# 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. 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.



## **Coach Tours UK magazine Buxton, Derbyshire**

Date: Monday 27th April 2020

Time: 9am

Description: A chance to explore the Buxton area, with many hidden gems to add to your future tour itineraries.

**Contact:** Matthew Inglis, Editor, Coach Tours UK:  
01733 363480 or [editor@coachtoursuk.com](mailto:editor@coachtoursuk.com)

Amanda Smith: 01733 363481

Leigh Chapman: 01733 362307



## **Just for groups!**

### **RHS Garden Wisley & Discover Guildford Weekend**

Date: 24th April 2020 - 2 or 3 nights, based in  
Leatherhead

Description: The itinerary for our latest group organiser educational provides some unique behind the scenes experiences that will add extra benefits to this special spring weekend exploring this beautiful region of Surrey that is perfect for a group break.

**Contact:** To book your place contact Just for Groups on  
01603 886740 or email [sales@justforgroups.com](mailto:sales@justforgroups.com)

w: [www.justforgroups.com](http://www.justforgroups.com)





### Just for groups! Chatsworth Flower Show

Date: 11th-13th June (Thursday to Saturday)  
- 2 nights based in Sheffield

Full details yet to be released. Check [www.justforgroups.com](http://www.justforgroups.com) for information.



### Just for groups! Kynren & County Durham

Date: 31st July - 2 or 3 nights based near  
Darlington

Full details yet to be released. Check [www.justforgroups.com](http://www.justforgroups.com) for information.



### Ellen Smith Tours Southern Wales

Date: Monday 26th October 2020 - 4 nights based at the  
Mercure Newport



Description: A group organiser fam trip, fully escorted by Pam Wharton, staying at the Mercure Newport hotel, a brand new hotel due to open in April 2020 in the chartist Tower in the heart of Newport. The itinerary includes visits to Tredegar House (pictured), the Rhondda Heritage Park and Welsh Mining Museum, Dewstow Gardens & Grottoes, Brecon Mountain Railway, guided tour of Cardiff and Cardiff Bay, and free time in Cardiff. The trip is open to all AGTO GTO members plus spouse/partner/friend. The price is £199 per person sharing a twin/double room (£64.00 single room supplement) but this amount is refunded should you book your group with Ellen Smith Tours in 2021. The coach will go from the Greater Manchester area but self-drive GTOs are also welcome. A deposit of £75.00 per person is required to secure a place.

**Contact:** Pam Wharton

t: 01706 648126 | e: [p.wharton@ellensmith.co.uk](mailto:p.wharton@ellensmith.co.uk)

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# Carlie's Theatre Tips

**Heading to London to see a show is always a special event. But these days, with many West End shows touring the rest of the UK, heading to your local theatre could save you time and money. GTO Carlie Newman offers a few tips on shows you really should catch.**

Let's start in London with the musical 'Come From Away'. This award-winning show, currently running at the Phoenix Theatre in Charing Cross Road and booking until 23 May 2020 tells the true story of the 38 flights that were diverted to the tiny town of Gander in Newfoundland following the 9/11 bombings.

With US airspace closed, all planes in the air at the time were instructed to land. Gander has a huge airport and could take many diverted flights, but it has a population of just 9,000. When 7,000 strangers 'come from away' without any warning the community rallies round providing them with beds, food and showers. These strangers end up staying for five days before continuing their journeys. Both they and their hosts are changed for ever.

The cast of 12 actors, who sing and do choreographed movement, play both locals and visitors. It's a remarkable piece of theatre production. The songs have a folksy tinge to them and are sung with feeling by the impressive cast. Showing how two different groups (with individuals within each group) can come together in difficult circumstances, this musical is passionate, moving and extremely well-executed. It gets five stars from me!

[www.comefromawaylondon.co.uk](http://www.comefromawaylondon.co.uk).

Another musical about to start is 'Hairspray', which runs at the London Coliseum, St Martin's Lane, from 23 April

to 29 August. Starring Michael Ball and Paul Merton this is an unmissable show.

There is a nationwide tour of this super musical playing at major venues from August 2020 – you can book now. [www.hairsprayuktour.com](http://www.hairsprayuktour.com).

'Waitress' will end its current run at the Adelphi Theatre on 4 July 2020, but then starts a major 23-venue UK and Ireland tour before returning to the West End. [www.waitressthemusical.co.uk/tour](http://www.waitressthemusical.co.uk/tour).

The UK Tour of 'Bat Out of Hell – The Musical', featuring Jim Steinman and Meatloaf's greatest hits, starts in September 2020. Each venue on the tour will also be hosting special sing-a-long performances where audience members are encouraged to dress up as their favourite character from the show and sing along with the cast. Performances start at Manchester Opera House on 10 September, then heading to Birmingham, Wimbledon, Oxford and Glasgow before ending the tour at Liverpool Empire in December. [www.batoutofhellmusical.com](http://www.batoutofhellmusical.com).

Last but not least, 'BalletBoyz', the exciting multi-award-winning dance troupe, all-new, live dance show in celebration of the company's 20th anniversary year embarks on a nationwide UK tour from 1 March through to May. For further details see [www.balletboyz.com/whatson](http://www.balletboyz.com/whatson).

*Photo: Come From Away*



Date	Branch	Events	Contact
20th April	Southern	Branch Meeting and Fam: BAi360 and Royal Pavilion, Brighton	Jackie Ring ring_jackie@yahoo.co.uk 01483-824450
8-11th May	Central	VE Celebration weekend, Torbay Court Hotel, Paignton.	julia32@virginmedia.com
9th May	Eastern	Essex Police Museum	joan.hanks@virginmedia.com
11-12th June	National	British Tourism & Travel Show, NEC, Birmingham	www.tourismshow.co.uk
19th June	Kent	Biggin Hill Memorial & Dean House	Jim Silvester - jamessilvester600@msn.com
20th June	Western	Chavenage house, Beverston, Glos	Martin Gibson mgibson.gts@talktalk.net
5th July	Eastern	Stockwood Discovery Park, Luton	Joan Hanks joan.hanks@virginmedia.com
10th Sept	National	Go Travel Show, Kempton Park	www.gotravelshow.com
6th or 8th October	Kent	Canterbury Tales and Branch AGM	Jim Silvester - jamessilvester600@msn.com
8th Oct	National	Group Leisure & Travel Show, Milton Keynes	www.grouptravelshow.com
2nd-4th Nov	National	World Travel Market, Excel, London	www.london.wtm.co.uk
13-15th November	Western	AGM and BRANCH weekend Metropole Hotel, Llandidrod Wells	Martin Gibson Mgibson.gts@talktalk.net
20th-21st Nov	Kent	Autumn Break, Daish's Holidays for Groups, Kendal	Jim Silvester jamessilvester600@msn.com
10th December	Kent	Christmas Get Together at either Eastwell Manor or Grand Hotel Folkestone	Jim Silvester - jamessilvester600@msn.com
<b>2021</b>			
6-8th January	National	AGM and SHOWCASE aboard Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines 'Black Watch', Liverpool to Southampton	agto@agto.co.uk



# The Last Word: Innovation - What innovation?

by Wendy Hartley-Scarff, Chief Executive, AGTO

## How quickly things change.

**When I sat down to write this column at the end of last year, the biggest headache affecting travel was Brexit. Now look at what's happened!**

However, although caution, and regular hand-washing have become the order of the day, the situation isn't stopping group travel organisers looking for inspiration that will help them put together trips and tours for a later date.

2019 was a year in which GTOs started to exert their influence in persuading and encouraging visitor attractions to think outside the box when it comes to group-friendly products. Equally importantly, it became evident that a growing number of attractions were taking heed, making it clear in their 'Group Visits Guides' that although there

was a standard group product, they were ready to be flexible to meet the specific requirements and expectations of the GTO.

So great news. But to my mind there's something missing. Where's the innovation? Now, you might be thinking that there are lots of new and refreshed products. Indeed there are. In the last issue of this magazine we carried two very positive reports about Kynren, the live action outdoor event in County Durham described as a 'journey through 2,000 years of history, myth and legend. The trip was organised by Just for Groups!, one of our Associate members. As you'll see in our fam trip pages in this issue there's another fam trip planned for July. Let's hope the current hiatus has been resolved by then.

But is this real innovation? Well yes, in a way. After all it's the result of some very creative minds. But when I say innovation I guess I'm thinking of a product that changes the way we do things.

One product that fits this description are autonomous pods, perhaps more accurately described as self-driving or driverless vehicles. I have no doubt that over the next couple of years we'll see a number

of visitor attractions introducing these pods to provide visitor transport, both to get people around a site, and to provide assistance to those whose legs may not be quite what they were. Indeed, an autonomous dotto road train is surely just around the corner.

I also hear of a development at Exeter Cathedral where visitors who don't want to or are unable to climb the North Tower will be given virtual reality headsets that will show them what it would have been like.

The move to electric power also offers opportunities for the industry to show its eco-friendly credentials. In the next few weeks, the Rendezvous Hotel in Skipton, another AGTO Associate member, will be launching its new all-electric restaurant boat on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal. Doing away with a traditional diesel engine immediately opens the way to a more serene and peaceful way to enjoy the canalside scenery. The hotel says it's the first such boat of its kind to offer dinner cruises on the canals of Great Britain. As GTOs look around for new ideas for their groups, I have a feeling it won't be the last.

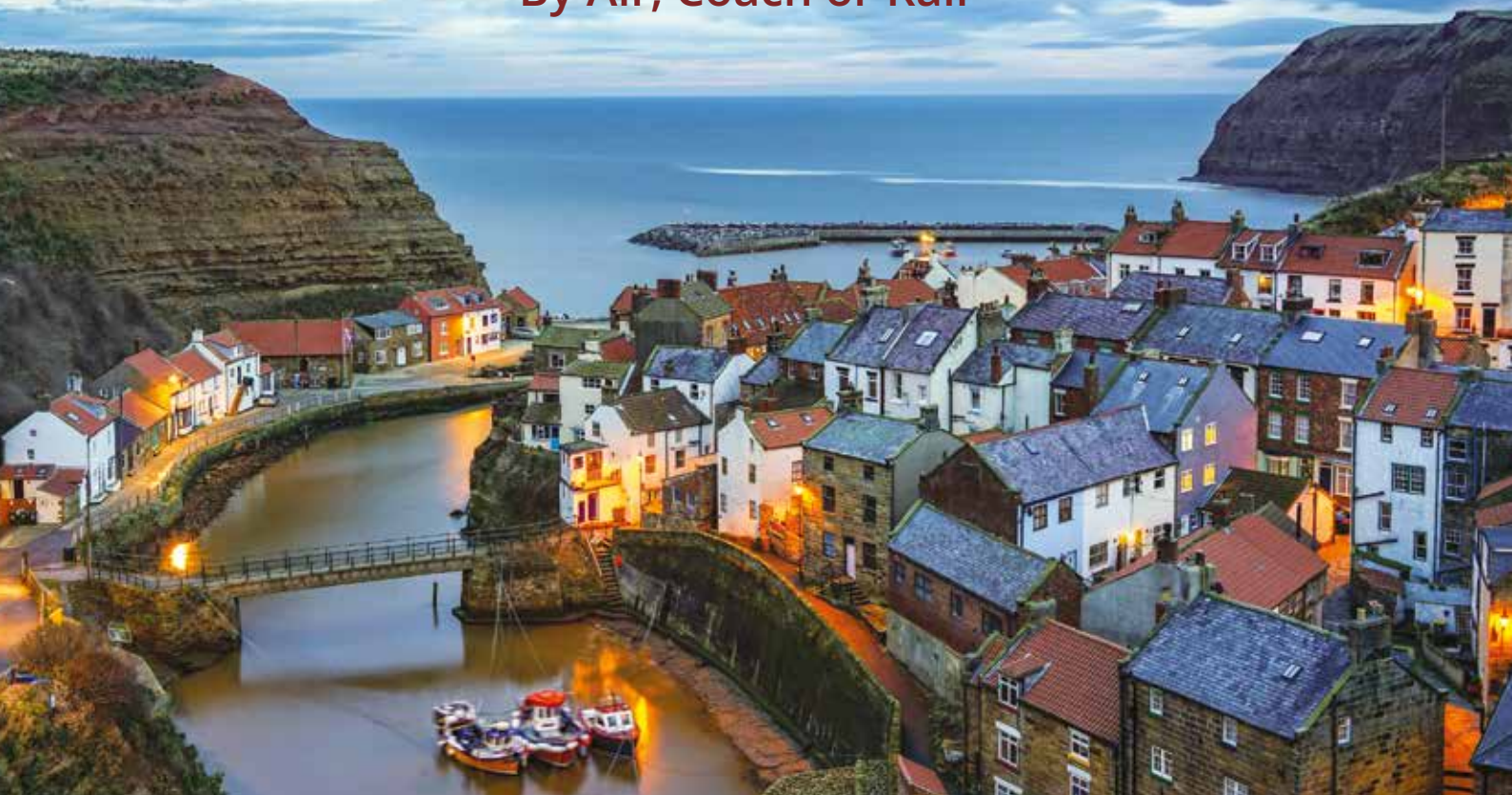
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