

AG  
TO

association of  
group travel organisers

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MAGAZINE



Devon coach tour highlights COVID safety

## In this issue...

**AGTO News..... p3**

**Making coach holidays safe ..... p8**

We report from the first coach tour to operate since lockdown

**What next for Mill Rythe?..... p14**

**This is your 'group travel' life..p16**

Now retired, Harold Burke looks back at his career in travel

**All aboard the 'Staycation**

**Express' ..... p18**

Rob Carroll reports on a unique train journey

**Around the country**

**with AGTO ..... p23**

Thoughts from Branch Chairs and reports and stories from our GTO members

**Exclusive AGTO fam trip to**

**northern Greece ..... p41**

**Behind the scenes at CJAM..... p42**

**Associate Guest Columnist ..... p43**

John Johnson of Johnsons Coach Travel looks at how the group travel landscape is changing

**Carlie's Theatre Tips ..... p44**

**Test your knowledge ..... p46**

**Membership benefits ..... p48**

**AGTO events diary ..... p50**

**The Last Word..... p51**

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## Supporting the AGTO family

Welcome to the autumn issue of the AGTO Magazine.

So here we are in autumn and still in varying degrees of lockdown. The good news is that travel is now starting up again. Thanks to the sterling work being done by the travel and tourism industry to provide COVID-secure travel and hospitality, many people are now feeling reassured about getting out and about.

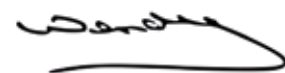
But having a much-needed few days away yourself is quite a different matter from taking your group out on a day trip. Visitor attractions are slowly opening up for groups, a process that has taken longer than expected often due to concerns about managing social distancing on arrival and on-site. For now, small groups are the order of the day, not least because of the limits on passenger numbers on coaches required by social distancing.

You may have seen that coach operators are facing their own challenges too, with many facing a truly desperate future. Welcoming customers back is really good news for them, but there's a new challenge. The cost of COVID-approved cleaning materials, and paying drivers more

because preparing a coach now takes longer, is a hit on their bottom line. Your day out is therefore likely to cost more, and with fewer passengers, the per-person price will increase. I'm hearing from GTOs that in general though, group members understand why prices may be higher and are happy to pay the extra if it means they can get out and about.

To my mind, AGTO is a family, a family of like-minded GTOs and Associate members. More than ever before, everyone needs to be supporting each other. When you're planning a day trip or a holiday for your group, talk to Associate members first. Give them the opportunity to see how they can help. You'll find their details on the new website and in the AGTO Handbook. And if you're speaking with a supplier that isn't an AGTO member, perhaps you might encourage them to join.

But for now, enjoy planning for the future, and stay safe.



Wendy Hartley-Scarff,  
CEO, AGTO

# AGTO News

## COACH OPERATOR MOVES TO REASSURE CLIENTS LOOKING TO RESTART DAY TRIPS

Coach operator Johnsons of Henley-in-Arden has produced a set of 'Safe Operating Procedures' in a move to offer reassurance to group travel organisers and school groups looking to restart day trips and holidays by coach.

The family-owned company, an AGTO Associate member, is one of several leading coach operators to act in this way.

Key points from the new procedures, which Johnsons says are there to "protect our staff, our passengers and anyone else that we may come into contact with as we carry out our holidays," include:

- A comprehensive coach cleaning procedure of all floors, seats, glass surfaces, driver controls, handrails, seat belt buckles and armrests, together with vehicle anti-viral fogging on a weekly basis.
- A temperature check of each passenger prior to boarding.
- Ensuring an orderly process for boarding and alighting where the driver exits first, followed by passengers, starting with those at the front of the coach, and ensuring social distancing is in place at all times.

Johnsons says that passengers who live together in the same household or are part of a social 'bubble', may sit together on a double seat. The front double seat immediately behind the driver will not be used. The company says that the combination of normal front-facing seating, the physical barrier of the high backed seats, plus the use of face coverings, all help to ensure maximum mitigation of the dangers and maximum safety.

Like many coach operators, Johnsons has upgraded the air-conditioning systems on each tour coach to provide clean, filtered air.

Commercial director John Johnson says: "The new procedures are there not only to protect customers, but also our staff. We are operating with a maximum of 30 people on a 49-seat coach, dependent of course on how many single travellers, family groups and couples are booked to travel. In a discussion with coach tourism specialist Stuart Render, a former trade magazine editor (and editor of the AGTO Magazine) we looked at how best we could show the work we

have been doing to restore confidence among our generally older customers, many of whom may have concerns about social distancing. Many coach operators have produced photos of empty coaches showing selected seats out of use. Stuart made the point that a photo showing how the coach would look with passengers on board would really show how social distancing will work. The photo provides a valuable addition to our existing safety initiatives."

You can see the full set of safe operating procedures at [www.johnsonskoaches.co.uk/news/262/covid19-safe-operating](http://www.johnsonskoaches.co.uk/news/262/covid19-safe-operating)

Turn to page 6 for a full report on AGTO Associate member Dunwood Travel's first coach holiday.



## DOES COVID MEAN YOU HAVE TO PAY MORE?

Two of the UK's leading coach operators are saying they're aiming to be flexible when it comes to charging for coach hire, day trips and holidays during the pandemic.

However, the operators, both of whom are AGTO Associate members, say there's a balance to be struck between staying competitive in a challenging market and finding ways to ensure that GTOs are comfortable with the prices being asked for.

Woods Travel of Bognor Regis has found itself facing a significant increase in costs because of the need to buy additional cleaning materials. Joint managing director, Tina Shaw-Morton, explains that wherever possible the company is charging the normal price.

"When it comes to private hires we find ourselves in a challenging position," she says. "We can't afford for a hire to cost us money. But we also recognise that some GTOs may be unhappy about paying the normal rate for a coach knowing that instead of 53 people they will only be able to take 25. In such circumstances those 25 are likely to have to pay more per person. We do look at individual requirements and we try to be flexible and provide the best price we can."

Tina makes the point that drivers now have to spend longer preparing their vehicles.

"That means we have to pay them more," she explains. "We also use a specialist fogging mist that sanitises the inside of the coach. It's an expensive product but it gives a full seven-days' protection. We have litres and litres of sanitising fluid

along with supplies of protective gear for our staff. It can add significant amounts to our costs, but they're not costs we're necessarily able to pass on to our customers."

Johnsons of Henley-in-Arden has taken a direct route in showing customers what the effects of having to be COVID-secure actually means. The company operates a programme of 'Express Excursions', the USP of which is 'one price, one pick up point'. The normal price of £23 per person has been increased to £29. Explaining this, Johnsons says: "Prices include a £6 per person COVID-19 supplement which we are having to implement due to increased cleaning measures, additional face masks and reduced passenger numbers. In addition, we have launched our 'COVID:19 Assurance' meaning that if you have to miss your Express Excursion due to having symptoms or being required to self-isolate then your Express Excursion will be fully refunded."

The company says that the majority of its customers have been happy to pay the additional amount.



## RENDEZVOUS HOTEL MOVES TO HELP TOUR OPERATORS EXTEND THE SEASON

Skipton's Rendezvous Hotel is giving GTOs and tour operators an opportunity to offer short breaks during the traditionally quieter shoulder months.

The 96-bedroom hotel, the 'Yorkshire

Hotel by the Canal', and an AGTO Associate member, is highlighting the availability of *Graceful Swan*, the first all-electric restaurant barge of its type to operate on the canals of the UK.

Malcolm Weaving, the owner of the hotel, believes the new boat, which operates on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, will prove attractive to GTOs and tour operators looking for something

different to include in their programmes in the autumn and winter.

"In *Graceful Swan* we have a dining experience like no other," he says. "The boat is fully heated so as we move into the autumn and winter months it provides a welcome and unusual experience for diners. Floodlights are fitted to the roof to illuminate the vista of the canal banks for evening cruises. Food is freshly cooked in the hotel's own kitchen and brought aboard to be prepared in a purpose-built galley at the rear of the boat. The electric motors provide a serene and vibration-free dining experience. *Graceful Swan* will usually take up to 56 diners. With social distancing in place we can take small groups of 15. Whether you come to visit us this autumn and winter, or next year, you'll find that a cruise aboard *Graceful Swan* will be like no other."



**Graceful Swan is the first purpose-built, all-electric restaurant barge on the canals of Great Britain**

[www.rendezvous-skipton.co.uk](http://www.rendezvous-skipton.co.uk)

## CAIRN HOTEL GROUP LAUNCHES 'COACH WITH CONFIDENCE' SAFETY INITIATIVE

Cairn Hotel Group, which operates 33 hotels including The Majestic in Harrogate, Redworth Hall near Durham and the Old Ship Hotel in Brighton, has launched 'Coach with Confidence', a series of measures aimed at ensuring the safety and well-being of guests.

The Newcastle-upon-Tyne based company, an AGTO Associate member, says the procedures give reassurance that guest stays will take place in a safe and healthy environment where the strictest hygiene procedures are in place.

'Coach with Confidence' focuses on five key areas of activity: cleanliness; social distancing; food and beverage; staff training and 'Confidence with Cairn', this latter area covering coach cleaning and check-in.

"We are ready to welcome groups again," says Annette Gallagher, national account manager leisure. "GTOs who book a group for 2020 qualify for 10 single rooms without a supplement. We offer a free place for the coach driver in a sole occupancy room, and the provision of two free places for groups of over 18 people."

For more information, call Annette Gallagher on **07918 151256** or email **groups@cairnhotelgroup.com**.



## QUIRKY CASTLES AND CURIOUS COLLECTIONS

Where can you find the sword of an exiled prince, or a stone said to cure all poisons? Where do cradles take the shape of boats, and chandeliers bring down zeppelins? National Trust for Scotland knows the answer. It knows where tropical plants grow in northern winds. Where wine-jugs look like dodos and can show you desks that can talk and ceilings which give lessons in morality. NTS attractions can be found in every region of Scotland with no end to the number of curiosities.

NTS, an AGTO Associate member, offers a one-stop shop that can find you the perfect attraction for any

theme, no matter how quirky. Don't settle for the standard garden tour when you can enjoy the tropical oasis of Inverewe Gardens, the ancient heritage of Crarae, or the innovation of Threave. Don't bother trying to soak up history from dry museums when you can walk the opulent halls of castles like Crathes, Drum and Fyvie as if you were a Scottish laird yourself. At Culzean Castle the NTS can give lush teas if your guests want to experience true comfort, or nail-biting ghost tours if not!

But the NTS isn't sitting on its laurels. It's always experimenting.

At Brodie Castle it has launched a special tour with the head housekeeper who comes from a long line of housekeepers working at Brodie's ancestral home. NTS says that as lockdown lifts and people start to think of travelling again, it has found an increased interest in the hidden gems it can offer. Consider Hugh Miller's Birthplace Cottage: built by the famous folklorist's pirate great-grandfather, this little nook in Cromarty offers a fascinating glimpse into a world of fossils and tools. Largely unknown till now, this quirky attraction is thriving as people look around for fresh adventures.

NTS understands the world has changed post-covid. It has adapted

rigorously to the challenges of making its properties safe, so that your group is free to concentrate on its experience. In keeping with the theme, NTS asks that members of a group keep a distance of two broadswords from each other!

If you're interested in learning more, email the one-stop shop at **traveltrade@nts.org.uk**

## AWARDS SUCCESS

AGTO Associate members Daish's Holidays, Dunwood Travel, Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines, Houses of Parliament, Isle of Wight Tours, Rendezvous Hotel Skipton, Royal Museums Greenwich, Warner Leisure Hotels and West Midland Safari and Leisure Park all walked off with top prizes at this year's Group Travel Awards, organised by *GTO magazine*/Landor Travel Publications and held online on 3 September. Harold Burke, recently retired from just for groups!, received the award for 'Outstanding Contribution to Group Travel by an Individual'.

Looking ahead and AGTO GTOs Anne Barnes and Gwen Wright are contenders for the award for 'Group Travel Organiser of the Year' at this year's Group Leisure & Travel Awards that take place online on 7 October. Good luck to them and to the 30 or so AGTO Associate members who have also made the shortlist.



## THEMED BREAKS FOR GROUPS

The Leisure Club works in partnership with Ellen Smith Tours (both AGTO Associate members) to offer themed and special interest breaks for groups. There's a wide range of topics including 'Life as a Tiller', 'The Gin Experience', 'The Antique Experience', 'Gardeners Question Time – Ask an expert', 'Comedy Dining Experience', 'James Bond Themed Vegas Night', 'Sounds of the Sixties and Seventies', 'Last Night of the Proms', '1940s Remembrance Day Special', 'Christmas Spectacular with the Mike James Orchestra and Singers', and 'Bicester Village Shopping Break Offer'. There are also craft, dance and murder mystery breaks.

Pam Wharton, groups manager with Ellen Smith Tours, and a member of AGTO's Northern Branch committee, can package a break to include extra nights' accommodation, coach travel, excursion suggestions, comfort breaks and much more.

"If you have an idea of a theme your group would enjoy but don't know where to start, get in touch and we'll do the rest," says Pam. "Ellen Smith and The Leisure Club can also help you with organising any break away, whatever the theme or interest, and whether in this country or further afield. We never say never and really enjoy a challenge!"

For more information contact Pam on **01706 648126** or email **p.wharton@ellensmith.co.uk**.

Alternatively, contact Beverley Davis at The Leisure Club on **07834 361362** or email **info@theleisureclub.co.uk**



## DOUCAS TOURS OFFERS SALONICA REMEMBRANCE

Doucas Tours & Travel, one of AGTO's newest Associate members, offers historical and discovery tours to the Central Macedonian region of northern Greece. This is providing the opportunity for those who have an interest in the military history of a region that has become known as a war memorial destination.

In October 1915, after the Gallipoli campaign, the British and French opened a second Mediterranean front in Thessaloniki by moving three divisions to the city. By 1917, an army of approximately 600,000 men of six different nations camped in the city of 165,000 inhabitants.

## COVID-19 COVER FROM RIVIERA TRAVEL

Riviera Travel, the Midlands-based tour operator, is offering COVID-19 insurance cover as standard as it moves to offer reassurance for GTOs looking to organise a group holiday.

An AGTO Associate member, the company offers a comprehensive programme of continental European and worldwide escorted itineraries and river cruises for groups of 10 or more,

"As a group leader, your happiness and peace of mind, and that of every member of your group, is our top

Serres and Kilkis, two regions next to Thessaloniki, played a vital role during the First World War, but became bloody battle theatres. Today, there are 12 Commonwealth military cemeteries, the final resting place for 10,583 British soldiers. In the Allied military cemeteries of Zeitenlik-Thessaloniki, there are more than 20,500 British,

French, Serbian, Russian, Italian and Bulgarian men buried. Together with Greek soldiers, the fallen or dead of the Salonica Front WWI count more than 32,000.

The history of the Salonica Front WWI is preserved as a legacy. Doucas Tours & Travel offers a range of itineraries that tells the story, from the bunkers and trenches of the defence line of Serres, to the battlefields and the memorials of Kilkis, and from the military cemeteries to the war museums.

For more information, go to **[www.doucastours.gr](http://www.doucastours.gr)**

See page 41 for news about an exclusive AGTO fam trip to the region.

priority," says groups manager Alison Stoakes. "All our holidays now come with COVID -19 cover as standard. If for any reason you're not able to travel on the planned holiday or cruise as a direct consequence of COVID-19 you can transfer your holiday to a later date completely free of charge. We will ensure you're following all local safety guidelines and social distancing requirements for every destination throughout your holiday, so you can relax, recharge and explore, whilst we do all the hard work behind the scenes."

For more information email **[groups@rivieratravel.co.uk](mailto:groups@rivieratravel.co.uk)**

## NATIONAL GARDEN SCHEME OFFERS INVITE TO SMALL GROUPS TO VISIT ITS GARDENS

National Garden Scheme (NGS) is reminding GTOs and tour operators that many of its spectacular gardens are now welcoming small groups.

Linda Shelton, visitor development manager with NGS, an AGTO Associate member, says that this may be of interest to some GTOs whose members would be happy driving to a garden that's not too far from them.

"They could enjoy the garden whilst at the same time meeting up with some of their social group who they may not have seen for a long time," she explains. "A private visit, meaning that a small group would be the only people in the garden at that time, provides another option. Many people have found our gardens one of the safest, most comfortable and most enjoyable places for a trip out."



Details of gardens accepting private visits, which vary from a couple of people to as many as the government guidelines will allow, can be found at [www.ngs.org.uk/groups](http://www.ngs.org.uk/groups).

GTOs should contact the garden owner directly to enquire about availability, parking, admission costs, facilities or refreshments (which are available in some gardens). Bookings and payments are made directly with the relevant garden owner.

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

## FRED. OLSEN'S *BOUDICCA* AND *BLACK WATCH* TO RETIRE

Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines has announced that two of its best known ships, *Black Watch* (see photo) and *Boudicca* will be replaced by two new vessels, *Bolette* and *Borealis* when cruising begins again in 2021.

These additions to the fleet will increase the company's overall capacity by around 30%. Each vessel will carry under 1,400 guests and have new and larger public areas, whilst remaining true to Fred. Olsen's small ship experience.

Information on the AGTO Showcase and AGM cruise, due to be hosted by Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines in January 2021, will be announced in due course.



## INDUS EXPERIENCES LAUNCHES FAM TRIP PROGRAMME

Indus Experiences, the UK-based tour operator that offers escorted tours for small groups to southern Asia, has announced a new programme of familiarisation trips for GTOs.

Currently celebrating 25 years of organising bespoke group tours to Bhutan, Burma, Cambodia, India, Laos, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Vietnam, the company, an AGTO Associate member, has recently added Uzbekistan (see

photo above) to its portfolio of destinations.

Two fam trips have been announced for 2021. In May there will be an opportunity to visit Uzbekistan while in September there is an opportunity to visit Nepal. The company plans to offer two further fam trips in 2022 and 2023.

Commenting on the new fam trips, managing director Yasin Zargar, says: "Our tailor-made tours offer a vast array of special interests including art, wildlife, horticulture, battlefield and family history tours, river cruising, luxury

trains, nature and photography. Groups are accompanied by hand-picked, professional guides and local experts. As we look forward to our next 25 years our two new fam trips for 2021 will give selected GTOs the opportunity to discover the relatively unknown country of Uzbekistan and culturally rich Nepal."

AGTO member Sue Shapland, who has organised many continental tours for her group, the Exmoor Extroverts, says: "I was very excited when I first discovered a fam trip was being organised by Indus Experiences for GTOs to discover Nepal. The country is somewhere that has always held a fascination for me and somewhere I'm sure my group will be interested in visiting. There is a brilliant itinerary arranged for us, with very experienced guides and I'm really looking forward to this tour next year."

Spaces on these fam trips are limited so for more information and to register your interest, email [holidays@indusexperiences.co.uk](mailto:holidays@indusexperiences.co.uk). [www.indusexperiences.co.uk](http://www.indusexperiences.co.uk)

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# Making coach holidays SAFE

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**Having the confidence that day trips and holidays by coach will be safe is the key concern facing GTOs looking to restart activities for their groups. Stuart Render reports from the first coach tour to operate since lockdown eased, and finds that coach operators and hoteliers are working hard to ensure COVID-secure travel and hospitality.**



It's a Wednesday morning in July, and there's a man pointing a gun at my forehead!

It's an unusual way to start a coach tour, but then again, these are unusual times.

I'm standing in the purpose-built departure lounge of Dunwood Travel in Dudley in the West Midlands. Company owners Colin Duncan and Phil Westwood (the 'Dun' and the 'Wood' of the name), and operations manager Stuart Parker have kindly invited me to join their first coach tour to operate since lockdown.

But I'm a little bit anxious. Since lockdown was introduced in March I've been adhering to the rules. The furthest I've travelled by car is the two miles or so to my local supermarket.

The invitation to join this coach tour has meant a journey by car of nearly a hundred miles from my home in Lincolnshire.

Then there's the thought of our holiday destination. It's Torquay, another 180 miles or so away. Images of crowded West Country holiday hotspots flash across my mind.

What am I doing? Will it be safe? Wouldn't it have been better to have stayed at home and avoid the possibility of coming into contact with anyone with the virus?

## **Not hot under the collar**

So in a way, I'm rather relieved to find Stuart Parker pointing a gun at my forehead!

It's not a gun of course, but an infra-red device that measures your temperature. As I stand still and Stuart targets my

forehead with a red dot, I do wonder if worrying about the process itself will mean my temperature increases. Apparently normal body temperature is around 37°C, with 38°C or above an indication that something is up. Stuart smiles and shows me the reading on the device. I'm clearly feeling chilled as it reads 33°C.

Dunwood Travel offers a number of pick-ups across the Midlands. Today our full-size coach left the garage a few hours earlier and is already at work picking up my fellow travellers in Coventry. Here in Dudley it's just Kate and Eileen, two Dunwood regulars, who join me as Stuart leads us out to a minibus. We'll be heading to Hopwood Park services on the M42 to join the coach. Both ladies have also been 'shot' and are also clearly feeling chilled!

We board the minibus, Stuart directing us to our allocated seats. Most seats have a notice on them saying 'Do not sit here'. Kate and Eileen, who are friends and have formed a 'bubble, sit together. I sit on my own, an experience that will become commonplace in the days ahead. Stuart is coming to Hopwood Park with us to make sure everything is ok. He sits across the aisle. We're all wearing face coverings, including our driver.

On the 30-minute journey I ask Stuart about the trip.

"We've spent a great deal of time putting together our COVID-secure processes," he says. "We know that some people, because of the lockdown, have lost confidence in getting out and about again. It's really important to everyone at Dunwood that we offer reassurance that they can travel with us as safely as we can make it. We have a first-class





relationship with TLH Leisure Resort in Torquay and we know that the team there have put in place a raft of measures to ensure COVID-secure hospitality. We decided then to operate this trial tour to the Toorak Hotel, one of the four hotels on the TLH site. We will normally carry a maximum of 25 passengers on a full-size coach, but for this first trip we only have 11. Your fellow passengers are all regular Dunwood clients. They trust us to get it right.”

#### Staying alert at the services

We arrive at Hopwood Park services. Each Dunwood coach is fitted with a tracking device and Stuart can see that our

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**It seems we're about the only tour coach in south west England! It all feels rather adventurous.”**

coach is about 10 minutes away. That gives an opportunity to visit the facilities. A one-way entry and exit system into the building is working well and there's plenty of signage reminding you to keep your distance. Most of the catering outlets are closed giving the usually bustling services a surreal feel. It's not busy but there are still one or two people who seems not to want to adhere to the social distancing guidelines. It's important then to stay alert and if necessary, move out of the way.

I'm back at our minibus just in time to see our coach arrive. Our driver, Damon, steps off the coach. He's one of Dunwood's most experienced tour drivers and has been specially chosen for this 'first' trip. He will be observing how the new processes work and feeding back to head office. I watch as my fellow travellers alight, keeping their distance from each other as they do.

But it's when it's time to board the coach again that one of the more challenging aspects of social distancing becomes apparent. It's a pleasant morning and we've all been congregating on the pavement area in the coach park. Damon makes an announcement.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it's time to board the coach. Remember, to ensure social distancing you have to board in the order that you're seated.”

#### “Order, order!”

Our group of 11 is made up of five single travellers and three couples. The eight who had boarded the coach earlier in the day have been allocated seats starting from the back of the coach. A gentlemen allocated a seat on the back row boards first, followed by the others in turn. Kate and Eileen, my fellow minibus travellers, take their seats two rows behind the driver. I've been allocated the front nearside seat. Stuart Parker tells me that Dunwood avoids having two people sat on the front nearside seats as the person sitting by the aisle is then too close to the driver. Last to board is Damon. Once again we're all wearing face coverings.

As boarding takes place I do wonder what will happen on a rainy day, or when it's cold. The usual scramble to get on the coach as quickly as possible won't be allowed to happen and passengers will have to wait outside to board in order. But what happens when one or more passengers are late back. What happens if someone doesn't want to leave the coach? Will the driver have to insist that everyone leaves the coach, whether they want to or not?

Dunwood says that these are all elements of the process that are being monitored, with drivers expected to ensure compliance, but using their discretion where needed.

Before we depart, Damon explains that there is a toilet on board, but it should only be used in an emergency. He rightly points out that if it is used he then has to stop the coach to sanitise the whole cubicle. This, of course, will take time and add to the journey.

There's also a surprise waiting for us. On our seat is a



Dunwood goody bag containing extra face coverings, safety instructions, some nibbles, and a Dunwood brochure. A small bottle of white wine completes this welcome package.

### A breath of fresh air

We get under way and I have my first experience of travelling by coach under COVID-secure regulations. A look back inside the coach reveals my fellow passengers all wearing their face coverings. On a normal coach trip you'll usually have people sat around you. This time there's a feeling of isolation, although this won't be so noticeable with a 'full' coach of around 25.

Dunwood is one of a number of coach operators that have fitted additional air purifiers to their vehicles. These produce ions and ozone in the correct proportions to disinfect the air within the coach. This has the additional benefit of removing odours and raising oxygen levels, something that can reduce the risk of driver fatigue.

Rather than stopping at another motorway services Damon takes us into Burnham-on-Sea where I throw caution to the wind and walk across the road from the coach park and enjoy a lunch of fish and chips in a delightful socially-distanced café. Once again the challenge of boarding the coach in an order that ensures we all remain socially distanced presents a challenge. One couple have returned early and Damon has



**I haven't felt worried or frightened at all. Dunwood has done it well.**

allowed them to sit on the coach. But when it comes to full boarding Damon asks them to get off so everyone can then board in order. The weather is fine but it's easy to see how this will present challenges when it's raining.

### Passing places

And so to Torquay, where, rather pleasingly, the BBC is waiting for us. Colin Duncan, keenly aware of the opportunity for some positive PR, had been speaking with BBC News in the days prior to the trip. A local Midlands crew had filmed the departure from Coventry, and interviewed a few of the passengers. We're also the first coach to arrive in Torquay since lockdown and a second BBC crew films us getting off the coach. The report goes out that evening across the Midlands and south west England. It seems we're about the only tour coach in south west England! It all feels rather adventurous.

The Toorak is a 99-bedroom, three-star hotel, one of four hotels at the TLH Leisure Resort, the other three being the 82-bed Victoria, the 77-bed Carlton and the 174-bed Derwent. The Derwent is especially popular with groups and will be familiar to many readers.

I'm slightly anxious to see how the hotel reassures me about my safety and well-being. I don't need to worry. A one-way system is in place along the main corridors helping to ensure you don't find yourself meeting guests coming the other way. Where a one-way option isn't possible the hotel has introduced signed 'passing places' giving you the opportunity to keep your distance. On a sharp corner along one corridor the hotel has fitted a convex mirror so you can see if anyone else is coming towards you. In the communal areas there are clear signs indicating the entry and exit route.

### Trained hotel staff

I want to find out more about what the hotel is doing to reassure guests so I join Jason Garside, the chief executive of TLH Leisure Resort and his two fellow directors, John Finnegan and Ian Piercy, at a table on the open-air terrace.

"The Toorak is the first of our hotels to open," says Jason. "You're the first coach to arrive since 22 March. This gives us



the opportunity to see how our new processes are working. We're also pleased to be supporting Dunwood in this way."

He explains that staff have been given COVID-secure hospitality training.

"In addition to doing their normal jobs our staff have to watch out for guests who may not be adhering to the social distancing guidelines," he says. "Guests will only come to stay with us if they feel safe so everything we're doing is about confidence and reassurance. Of course it's not just the guests who need to feel safe of course, it's also our staff. This whole business is about people. We're proud of our staff. Our principle is to hire for attitude, then train for skills."

I ask Jason what's been involved in getting the hotel ready for re-opening.

"We've applied around 1,500 of the 2-metre distance markers to the floors of the corridors and communal areas around the site," he says. "You'll see them everywhere. We recognise that once people are on holiday and feeling relaxed they may forget about social distancing. We can't allow that to happen so all the signage is there, together with our trained staff to remind them. Every procedure has been looked at including how we treat non-compliance."

Jason points out that a guest who chooses to ignore the guidelines, or simply forgets, is no different from a guest flouting the normal rules of the hotel.

"If any guest behaves in a way that could put the health and safety of other guests at risk then we will have a friendly word," he explains. "That usually does the trick, but our ultimate sanction if a guest continues to misbehave is to ask them to leave the hotel. We can't police everything of course, so guests do need to stay alert but I'm confident that the combination of the signage and our trained staff will keep instances of anti-social behaviour to an absolute minimum."

Jason explains that one of the more noticeable changes that guests will experience is housekeeping.

"It's important that we reduce the number of contact points



between our staff and guests," he says. "We also appreciate that many guests may feel uncomfortable knowing one of the housekeeping team has been in their room. We've therefore stopped daily servicing of rooms. We'll happily supply new towels and toiletries if a guest requires them but otherwise we leave the bedrooms alone. Once a guest has checked out we sterilise the entire room. We're also programming more deep cleans."

### Cleanliness at meal times

It's time to get changed for dinner and I'm looking forward to seeing what COVID-secure hospitality means for the dining experience. Arriving at the Abbey Restaurant I'm directed to part of the restaurant where I can see my fellow travellers. I sit at a table set for two. Normally, single travellers will often share a table, but it's 'Billy-no-mates' for the five of us travelling alone. We all wave at each other across the socially distanced restaurant. It's another unusual COVID-related element of this trip. This arrangement stays the same for dinner and breakfast throughout our stay.

The printed menu carries today's date. It's a nice touch. Menu choice (which changes daily) is good with three starters, five main courses (including vegetarian option), and six desserts (including cheese and biscuits) plus tea or coffee and some homemade fudge.

But what stands out is the way your meal is served. For both dinner and breakfast a member of the restaurant staff comes



to your table. All staff wear face coverings. They take your order and disappear off to the kitchen. Soon they reappear carrying a large tray. They put this down on a nearby table and sanitise their hands. Then they pick up the plates or bowls and bring them to your table. This sanitising routine is followed every single time they return from the kitchen.

TLH prides itself on the quality of its live entertainment and range of leisure facilities. Sadly, the government regulations in place at the time of the visit means all that has stopped. However, entertainments manager Zoe has put together a nightly quiz, and for those that want it, a couple of rounds of bingo. The Toorak's Conway Bar, looked after by long-standing member of staff Di, keeps us supplied with the occasional half of lager!

It's worth pointing out that we're not alone in the hotel. The Toorak has been welcoming self-drive guests since the start of the week, and the quiz and bingo sessions, and the bar, attract quite a mix of guests, and ages – all socially distanced of course.

“

**As the carriage arrives and passengers exit, the couple are straight in, sanitising the surfaces. Once again I feel reassured.**

### Mingling with the public

Our five-day trip includes two full-day excursions, to Dartmouth and Plymouth, and a free day in Torquay. Once again I'm somewhat anxious about mixing with the general public, especially after being in the relatively secure surroundings of the coach and hotel.

In Dartmouth, Damon has arranged a boat trip on board the magnificent paddle steamer 'Kingswear Castle'. The vessel is operated by the Dartmouth Steam Railway and River Boat Company, the company that operates the heritage steam railway linking Kingswear and Paignton. We're instructed to wear face coverings, which seems odd considering that for most of the cruise along the River Dart we're all sat outside on the sun deck. But once again, it offers reassurance for those who may be concerned. Walking through Dartmouth later and it's clear that the majority of people are complying with social distancing. You just have to stay alert and move out of the way if you have to.

Our second excursions finds us in Plymouth and we're boarding a cruise operated by Plymouth Boat Trips from the Barbican. Once again we're sat outside and wearing face coverings. There's free time in Plymouth afterwards and I'm keen to see how social distancing is working in the city centre. I make my way to Drakes Circus, the city's newest shopping centre. As you approach the entrance the signage leaves you in no doubt about the rules. Keep to the one-way system! If you want to cross from one shop to another use the marked crossing points! The shopping centre staff are very much in evidence, guiding people where necessary. It's good to see.

Walking through the busy city centre is more of a challenge and means staying alert and moving away from people when necessary. It's likely that most GTOs planning a day excursion will, for the time being, probably avoid busy city centres.

### Sanitising the cliff railway

It's Saturday and today is our free day. I've decided to walk across Torquay and visit Babbacombe Model Village. It's a two mile walk that takes me up and down Torquay's many hills and



valleys. I encounter a few folk queuing across the pavement to enter shops. Most move out of the way to give me distance as I pass. One man doesn't and I stop. He looks up, apologises and steps to the side. It's all rather civil really.

The model village has implemented a one-way system to follow to explore this fascinating attraction. There's a lot to see with marked passing places you can wait in if people behind you want to get past.

I walk along to the Babbacombe Cliff Railway. Built in 1926, this magnificent visitor attraction has shuttled hundreds of thousands of holiday-makers to and from Oddicombe Beach. Waiting at the lower station to return to the top I find myself in the company of a husband and wife team who in normal times would be taking tickets. But today they have a new role. As the carriage arrives and passengers exit, the couple are straight in, sanitising the surfaces. Once again I feel reassured.

But there's one final challenge that really will make or break this holiday. Torquay itself.

I walk down into the centre, passing through the historic area of Ellacombe, and find myself in Fleet Street, the main pedestrian shopping street. It's busy, as is the pedestrian route by the marina and along the front. I'm aware of people sometimes getting too close, but it's ok, I simply move away from them.

### Positive feedback

It's now the final morning of our trip and we're gathering outside the front of the hotel waiting for Damon to call us forward to board the coach, in the correct order of course.

I ask Kate and Eileen, who I first met in the departure lounge at Dudley, what they think about the trip.

"Beforehand I was concerned the coach might be full," says Kate. "But from the start I haven't felt worried or frightened at all. Dunwood has done it well."

Eileen takes a similar view. "We've travelled with Dunwood

many times before and I've been pleased they've got everything sorted. The social distancing has been good and the hotel has done well. I particularly liked the way the restaurant staff kept cleaning their hands."

John, a single traveller from Leamington Spa is pleased with the pleasant attitude of all the staff. "With all the new regulations it could have been overbearing, but it wasn't. Dunwood and the hotel have to take the right precautions and that's been done. I felt safe."

Jeff, from Coventry, makes an important point. "There's a balance that's needed between ensuring the regulations are applied and letting us have a relaxing and enjoyable time. In my opinion the balance has been about right. Any more regulations though and it would take the fun out of it!"

On the way back to the Midlands I think about my holiday experience. Yes, the need to maintain social distancing means some elements of the trip have been different. Yes, you need to stay alert. But did I feel safe? The answer is a most definite yes!

As I write this it's two months or so on from my trip. A growing number of GTOs are telling me that members of their group are keen to get out and about again. Many coach and tour operators are really struggling at the moment and would undoubtedly welcome your business. They also clearly recognise that they have to offer you and your group the reassurances that you'll be safe with them whether it's for a day excursion or a holiday. So ask them what their COVID-secure processes are. Check what the hotel or visitor attractions are saying. Put all that together and you'll not only have the facts to present to your group, but you'll also be on the right route to enjoy that long awaited trip out.

*AGTO would like to thank Dunwood Travel, TLH Leisure Resort, Dartmouth Steam Railway and River Boat Company, and Plymouth Boat Trips for their kind hospitality.*

# Mill Rythe prepares to change



**It's all change at Mill Rythe Holiday Village on Hayling Island in Hampshire. The popular group destination (and AGTO Associate member) announced it isn't reopening this year as it begins a multi-million pound redevelopment. Cathy Murphy, head of groups & partnerships with owners Away Resorts, explains what's happening and why this is only the next step on Mill Rythe's remarkable journey.**

As you probably know, Mill Rythe operates in a very different way to self-catered holiday parks. It is a fully catered resort with up to 600 guests eating breakfast and dinner together in addition to viewing the nightly entertainment in the ballroom together. This 'package' offering is an essential element of the product and experience offered to our many groups.

However, for some time we have been planning to do something different and very special at Mill Rythe. We had previously announced plans to temporarily close in July 2021 and to redevelop it into an exciting self-catered holiday destination. But of course, we weren't expecting the coronavirus pandemic. After considerable discussion, we felt that if we were to reopen now, it would be incredibly difficult to ensure the safety of everyone, and be able to run the business profitably the way it is

presently configured. I personally know how much our group visitors love this place. I do too, but when you're faced with a situation unparalleled in history, we really didn't have an option - it was a really tough decision.

As a result, and if there's anything positive to take from the pandemic it's that the 'something very special' will be happening sooner than we had planned!

Next year will see Mill Rythe transformed into a self-catered holiday village. We are investing more than £10 million on new buildings and self-catering accommodation as part of a major modernisation programme. We will be embarking on a park-wide renovation project to build on Mill Rythe's reputation as a first-class place to visit and to add even more benefits and value to old and new holidaymakers.

A significant part of the total investment is going into 200 new,

high-quality, modern caravan holiday homes and luxury lodges offering spacious places to stay. The much-loved existing chalets are all being overhauled, reconfigured and will have lovely kitchens too!

Holiday home ownership - something that is becoming increasingly popular in the UK - will also be available for the first time. New bases are being created and added, offering visitors the chance to own their own piece of this amazing park. They will be able to take their pick of extensive views over the stunning Chichester Harbour Basin.

Alongside the new, contemporary accommodation there will also be an opportunity to enjoy a blend of self-catering and half-board getaways too.

For those wanting to make cooking a part of their break, each caravan will come with a fully equipped kitchen with everything needed. And for those who





**The Mill Rythe groups team (L-R) Carmen, Katy, Cathy, David, Angie and Helen.**

want to take a break from preparing meals, as well as the cleaning and the washing up, our on-site restaurant will offer the perfect setting for meals out.

If you are used to, and prefer the half-board option, an element of this will stay and allow you to mix and match meals and budget for your trip, enjoying a freshly prepared breakfast and delicious dinner options on the park and the freedom to eat lunch elsewhere or in the sunshine.

As always, Mill Rythe's entertainment offering will remain strong but it will also evolve to be more in sync with our offering at our other parks. We'll be announcing more about that in due course.

**One member of the Mill Rythe team who will be familiar to many readers is Katy Lansley, former holiday sales manager of Mill Rythe. She has moved to Sandy Balls Holiday Village in the New Forest while the redevelopment is carried out.**

**"Mill Rythe holds a really special place in my heart," she says. "I feel like if you cut me in half it would say Mill Rythe like a stick of rock. I'm really excited to see the park enter its next stage of evolution and I feel so lucky to have the opportunity to remain within the Away Resorts family whilst it all takes place. My transfer to Sandy Balls has come at a brilliant time for me and I'm excited for the new challenges ahead of me. The Away Resorts values and team are really important to me, we are like a family, and I wanted remain in the business no matter what!"**

Existing group visitors will still be able to enjoy all the benefits of an Away Resorts holiday once the work is completed. We don't have a completion date scheduled as of yet, but we will of course keep you posted.

We took over the village in 2010 and spent a decade building a satisfied customer base; working closely with group organisers and tour operators to put it on the map.

Large scale events, personal touches, attention to detail and a home away from home ethos have all helped make it a first-choice destination for groups, many of them coming back year after year.

Our work with groups will continue to be a key part of Mill Rythe's identity and we are keen to build on and extend our wonderful, existing networks. I will be continuing to head up groups and partnerships across the entire Away Resorts estate, all six parks. I have got to know so many lovely people over the years. One you may know is AGTO

## SUPERB LOCATION

**"Our stunning resort sits on an island off the coast of Hampshire and our customers know and love it for offering active, family-friendly and adult exclusive getaways in an accessible yet peaceful location," says Cathy Murphy. "Nestled alongside a tranquil estuary, our holiday village enjoys some of the UK's most wonderful scenery. Historically it has provided a great base for people looking to take long, sunny walks, explore some of the area's well-made cycle tracks or simply sit back, relax and admire the view. It has been described as the perfect place to enjoy a traditional British seaside holiday - and it doesn't disappoint. For those looking for a taste of local cuisine and culture, the bustling maritime city of Portsmouth is just 20 minutes away - packed with restaurants, shopping, museums, its own quiet beaches and bristling with undiscovered history."**

member Beryl Edwards from south London. She is a star and has regularly visited with her group of friends. We all love Aunty Beryl!

10 years ago we started out on our Mill Rythe adventure. The next 10 years looks set to be even more exciting. I hope you'll join us on our exciting new journey. So it's not goodbye it's... we'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when...

*To be kept up-to-date with more information about the 'new' Mill Rythe and all Away Resorts parks, go to [www.awayresorts.co.uk/mill-rythe/update/](http://www.awayresorts.co.uk/mill-rythe/update/) or to the FAQs page: [www.awayresorts.co.uk/mill-rythe/mlr-closure-faqs](http://www.awayresorts.co.uk/mill-rythe/mlr-closure-faqs)*



# The Co-op - a lifetime of dividends!



Harold and his wife, Jackie

**It had to happen one day. Harold Burke, a true AGTO supporter, retired from just for groups! at the end of July. But did you know he started his career at the Co-op? Here's his story.**

It's hard to believe my career in travel has spanned almost fifty years, not least because it was all down to the Co-op, fate and football! Having left school at fifteen I went full time at my local Co-op store, where I had a part-time job after school, mainly because it provided me with an income whilst I tried to work out what to do next with my life. When I spotted a job in the Manchester Evening News based in the wages department at the Co-op's head office in Manchester I decided to apply. As the story goes the interview went well, as I clearly supported the right football team, and was told there and then I had got the job.

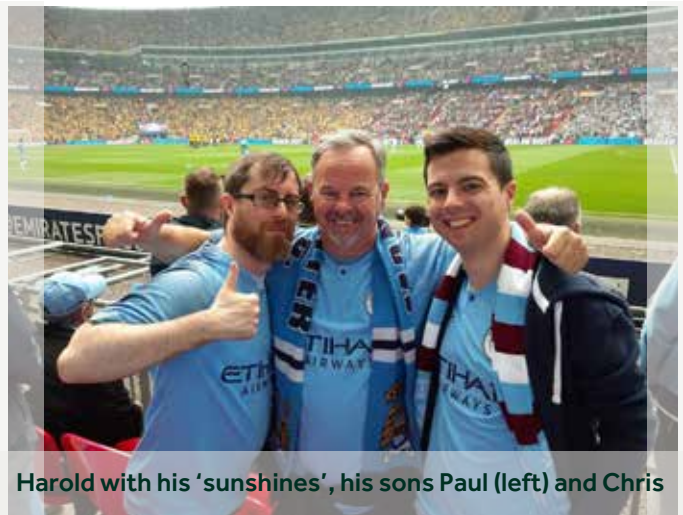
But I found it a bit strange not to be contacted with a start date. I called the HR department who told me "you had best come in on Monday". I thought nothing of it at the time but all became clear on my first day when I was called in to the general manager's office. He promptly explained I should not have been offered the job as they were in the process of making people redundant! Wow, what a start to my first day in the wages department!

## Supporting the right team

I seem to recall being fairly relaxed at the time, as I've always been a very trusting person, and they assured me they would try and find me a job elsewhere within the Co-op organisation.

Needless to say, within the week I had another interview where once again we talked about football. Naturally, hailing from Manchester, I supported the right team (City) and, as fate would have it, the job was mine and my lifelong career in 'group' travel was about to begin.

Throughout my career I've never forgotten for one moment just how lucky I was to have landed in travel. I doubt that I would have been the person I am today had I remained in the Co-op's wages department! Working in the group travel department proved to be the making of me, although at £8 per week not literally, as I seemed to have found my niche and took to the job like the proverbial duck to water. My line manager was Ray Clarke and I learned a lot through him. More so through the general manager, Wilf Kirkland, who was ex-RAF and proved to be a great mentor and taught me to be a stickler for attention to detail. Between them they put a lot of trust in me, and I in them, as that is my nature. I really loved working with groups and was soon putting my own stamp on things. When Ray retired he told me to apply for his job. I was about nineteen at the time and the department had several



Harold with his 'sunshines', his sons Paul (left) and Chris





### Industry recognition

Harold would always say that his success has been due mostly to his team. But there's no doubt that his own enthusiasm and commitment to group travel is what has brought professional success. He and his team have won a fair few awards over the year, but two stand out. In 2017 he received the award for 'Outstanding Contribution to Group Travel' at the Group Leisure & Travel Awards. Then on 3 September, at the 2020 Group Travel Awards, organised by GTO Magazine, he received the award for 'Outstanding Contribution to Group Travel by an Individual'. A fitting end to a magnificent career.



people who were much older than myself with many more years' service. So it came as a big surprise to hear I was his preferred choice.

Ultimately it was Wilf's decision and it turned out to be a one-horse race and before I knew it, I had moved from stacking shelves in my local Co-op to becoming the manager of the group travel department. I quickly picked up on the fact that being positive and proactive will often bring its rewards. It's something I have always endeavoured to instil in others if they want to succeed.

### Proposing in the print room

Most of the 'old guard', who were known for being awkward and negative, quickly moved on and I was able to build a team around me that I could work with. It was a great period and learning curve in my life. I was involved in all aspects of the job working with group leaders, coach operators, hoteliers and restaurants developing relationships that would last a lifetime.

I spent fifteen happy years at the Co-op and there are numerous events that took place and people I worked with over those years that will live long in my mind. The Co-op was also where I met my wife Jackie. We've been married since 1977 and have two sons, Paul and Christopher. Jackie worked in the department that organised train charters, which was the inspiration that created Saga. I remember first asking her out whilst we were both in the Gestetner print room – the high tech of the day!

I'm not sure if I would have still been at the Co-op today had it not been for a couple of major events I arranged with Pontins. One was a massive event based around machine knitting, held in Southport, which attracted a lot of media attention. The other was an educational event where we coached in over 300 group leaders to Torquay. The latter I remember more because my team, who were so pleased at how successful the event went, decided to throw me in the swimming pool at the end of the evening to celebrate, even though I couldn't swim!

### Hi-di-hi!

The amount of business we were doing with Pontins put me on their radar and their national sales manager, Mike Bird, made me an offer I simply couldn't refuse. It was 1986 and the job came with a company Ford Escort with the Pontins logo emblazoned on the doors. It was our first family car. All I had to do now was pass my driving test!

If I thought working for the Co-op was good (other than the pay) when it came to getting things done then Pontins was 'off the scale' and delivered whatever tools and resources I needed to do the job. I was promised rewards if I achieved results and they also delivered quickly on that point.

Without being disrespectful to anyone I have to say that Pontins held some of the best memories of my career. We worked hard, but we were also allowed to play hard. Our reputation in the coach and group markets became legendary as my own reputation began to flourish in an industry filled with camaraderie.

Between 1986 and 1996 our industry transformed dramatically as the internet and mobile phones started to make a presence. New companies appeared on the scene along with an identity driven by trade shows, magazines and trade bodies. Many of these are now familiar such as AGTO, the CTA, GTO magazine and Group Leisure & Travel.

From 1996 to 1999 my career saw me working for Butlins, Haven and Warners, and more memorable encounters with people who earned my deep respect and admiration.

There isn't space here to write about all that, or my time with The UK Holiday Group and where I spent my final 21 years before leaving sooner than anticipated, but for the best of reasons.

In so many ways I have learned 'it is always better to give than receive' as it brings a richness money can't buy. And my word will always be my bond as it is with the vast majority of people I have shared my wonderful journey with. Just one last thing to say. Thank you – I've been privileged to play my part in this amazing industry!

# ALL ABOARD THE STAYCATION EXPRESS

A new tourist train is hoping to help revitalise the industry in post-lockdown Britain. AGTO director Rob Carroll heads to north Yorkshire for a trip on the 'Staycation Express'.



For me lots of things began in Leeds. Independence, for a start, as I began a course many moons ago as a teenager studying German at Leeds University. I suppose my first cookery disasters happened in Leeds whilst trying hopelessly to fend for myself. My first romantic disasters happened there too. I hope I improved on both those scores. You will have to ask my wife, a Leeds lass I met a few years after I had left the city.

Our first mini holiday also began in Leeds. In our early days we bought a weekend hop-on hop-off ticket between Leeds and Carlisle, with a couple of nights booked above a pub in Settle that quickly became a favourite. It was a chance to explore the Settle & Carlisle Line, endangered for years despite its obvious touristic draw, a railway through the spine of the north country, skirting the Yorkshire Dales, crossing moors of Brontë-esque beauty and descending through Westmorland into border country.

After a lifetime travelling, for many years making rail holidays, I've been 'off the rails' these last few months shielding from COVID-19. Back out into the wide world I got the opportunity to retrace those tracks on board the newest rail excursion, the 'Staycation Express'. It seemed too good an opportunity to miss.

The 'Staycation Express' offers a special tourist service pulling former first class Inter City carriages three times a day in each direction across the Settle & Carlisle Line. You can join the train in Skipton or Settle at the southern end, whereas Appleby is the

excursion's northern terminus. Whilst not luxurious, the seating is spacious and comfortable, each seat coming with a table and positioned by a picture window to view the Pennines in all their changeable glory. Seating is arranged with four seats with table on one side of the aisle and two seats with table on the other side, each bay separated by unobtrusive perspex screens to conform with these unusual times. At stations, boarding and when walking around the train I wore my facemask, a train design (of course!) hand-made by my daughter. Otherwise, you can sit back mask-free and enjoy a little bit of nostalgia and escapism amidst the moorland heather.

I'd advise you not to get off at Dent Station. The village is nearly five miles away. There is, however, a bus connection to Kendal. Once a week.

Our humorous and unassuming train host, Anthony, was in full flow as we approached Dent, at 1,150 feet above sea level the highest mainline station in England and not actually a scheduled stop today. From pretty Appleby in the

Westmorland fells the train had fought hostile yet heavenly terrain, heaving slowly up to the line's highest point at Aisgill. At Garsdale, if you are quick, you can spot the statue of border collie Ruswarp (pronounced 'Russup'), the only dog to object to the closure of the Settle & Carlisle when the railway's own end of the line loomed in the 1980s. Up in the moors, in blissful isolation, with roads sparse and wildlife abundant, I felt thankful to faithful old Ruswarp and the 32,000 human objectors who kept this line alive.

After Dent came more drama. Our train trundled slowly above the 24 arches of the Ribbleshead Viaduct, more than 100 feet above the valley. Brooding clouds added to the drama before our descent through Ribblesdale to glorious sunshine at Settle, that town so close to my heart. A love reaffirmed in the startling beauty of this island. Catch the 'Staycation Express', returning in 2021.

*Rob Carroll writes a travel blog at [www.railholidaymaker.com](http://www.railholidaymaker.com) and is commercial director of AGTO Associate member. Airedale Tours.*



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## GLORIOUS GARDENS



### Wordsworth Country & Daffodils

March can only mean one thing to garden lovers like us – daffodils! And what better place to go searching for the sea of delicate yellow than the romantic lakes and fells of Wordsworth Country!

4 DAYS FROM £275

#### Included Excursions

- Rydal Mount & Dora's Field  
Rydal Mount, William Wordsworth's family home, commands glorious views of Windermere, Rydal Water and the surrounding fells. Dora's Field, next to St Mary's Church, was planted by Wordsworth in memory of his daughter Dora.
- Rydal Hall & Windermere  
Rydal Hall estate has developed from the 1600s until the present day with formal gardens, woodlands and iconic landmarks to explore. Designed and built by renowned landscape architect Thomas Mawson, the gardens are a fine example of Arts and Crafts design in a wonderful setting.

#### Your Hotel

##### Shap Wells Hotel

Nestled in a secluded wooded valley high in the Shap Fells by a mountain stream, Shap is an excellent base to explore the Lakes, Dales and Border Country. The Birkbeck Restaurant enjoys views over the surrounding Fells. The Riverside Lounge and Bar is a stylish and spacious art deco room with views of Birk Beck whilst Salterworth Lounge and Fell Bar has a log fire.

#### INCLUDED WITH AIREDALE

- ✓ Dinner, Bed & Breakfast ✓ Hotel accommodation
- ✓ All rooms ensuite ✓ Private coach travel
- ✓ Services of an experienced driver throughout your stay
- ✓ Excursions from your resort\*
- ✓ Free places in line with our Free Place Policy
- ✓ 6 singles free of supplement

\*Some admission charges may not be included in the holiday price

## TASTE SENSATIONS



### Taste Sensations of Tuscany

Fabulous Florence, lovely Lucca, pretty Pisa, a wide variety of delicious Tuscan specialities, Chianti, a cookery class and even a visit to Italy's smallest pasta factory – no stone uncovered on our tasty trip to Tuscany!

6 DAYS FROM £725

#### Included Excursions

- Enjoy a guided tour of Lucca, famed for its Opera House, followed by a hands-on cookery class at a rustic agriturismo, after which you will be rewarded with a delicious lunch.
- An unforgettable excursion by local train takes us to Renaissance masterpiece Florence for a guided tour and an experience of the city's street food culture, including a tasty porchetta, lauded as the world's best sandwich!
- Our guided tour of UNESCO World Heritage Pisa, with famous Leaning Tower, is followed by an off the beaten track tour to Lari to visit Italy's smallest pasta factory, with pasta and cherry liqueur tasting.
- Experience a full day in the charming Chianti region, with a truffle hunt and winetasting at a Chianti agriturismo.

#### Your Hotel

##### Hotel Adua & Regina di Saba, Montecatini Terme

A 4\* hotel in the heart of Montecatini Terme, a traditional spa town in the Tuscan countryside, the Hotel Adua & Regina di Saba offers outdoor and indoor pools, as well as a wellness area. The thermal spas are close by, as are the shops and railway station. The hotel features free Wi-Fi and elegant rooms with flat-screen TV, air conditioning and a private bathroom with toiletries and a hairdryer. Some have a spa bath and most include a balcony.

#### INCLUDED WITH AIREDALE

- ✓ Flights to/from Florence or Pisa
- ✓ Transfers and excursions as described
- ✓ Hotel accommodation ✓ All rooms ensuite
- ✓ 5 nights' half-board at the hotel
- ✓ Lunches and tasting snacks described in the itinerary
- ✓ English-speaking guide on all excursions

## YOUR UK FAVOURITES



### Picturebook North Devon

Situated amongst the sheltered coves and bays of Devon's Atlantic Coast, Ilfracombe's attractive harbour is a constant source of interest and its long, flat promenade offers much to see and do. Come on, let's go!

5 DAYS FROM £335

#### Suggested Excursions

- Visit the stunning RHS Garden at Rosemoor
- Combine quayside Bideford with blooming Barnstaple
- Admire the ponies and pretty villages of Exmoor

#### Your Hotel

##### Osborne Hotel, Ilfracombe

Owned and personally run by the Cox family for over 42 years, the hotel is a level walk from the town, harbour and beach. The large attractive dining room provides a magnificent 4-course table d'hote dinner each day.

##### Carlton Hotel, Ilfracombe

At the Ilfracombe Carlton Hotel you'll find an attractive period property which has been completely and thoughtfully modernised, the Victorian exterior giving way to a 21st century interior. The hotel is ideally located in Ilfracombe and within easy walking distance of the seafront, harbour and high street.

#### INCLUDED WITH AIREDALE

- ✓ Dinner, Bed & Breakfast ✓ Hotel accommodation
- ✓ All rooms ensuite ✓ Private coach travel
- ✓ Services of an experienced driver throughout your stay
- ✓ Excursions from your resort\*
- ✓ Free places in line with our Free Place Policy
- ✓ 6 singles free of supplement

\*Some admission charges may not be included in the holiday price

## YOUR EUROPEAN FAVOURITES



### Andalusian Adventure

Seville, Cordoba, Granada, wine, paella, pretty whitewashed mountain villages and proud regions with ancient pasts. It's culture, architecture, good food and great wine all the way on our Andalusian adventure.

8 DAYS FROM £1055

#### Included Excursions

- Enjoy a guided orientation walk of the dramatic town of Antequera.
- Visit a citrus farm, learning about the production of fruit. A paella lunch is then washed down with local wine, before we finish the day at El Chorro reservoir with spectacular views.
- Our panoramic guided tour of Córdoba features a visit to the city's Mosque-Cathedral, an important monument of Moorish architecture. We end the day with tasting at a Córdoba winery.
- Our full day to stunning, historic Granada includes entrance to the Alhambra palace and fortress, a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the most beautiful and romantic Moorish buildings.
- Our full day tour to Seville includes a guided tour of the city's Santa Cruz Jewish Quarter.
- A half day ride through the Andalusian countryside uncovers the El Torcal ancient rock formations and the dolmens of Antequera.

#### Your Hotel

##### Hotel Antequera

The Hotel Antequera is a four star hotel situated only 5 minutes from the historic quarter of Antequera. Its leisure facilities will impress, with a spa, gymnasium, indoor heated pool, outdoor pool, and the hotel also lies next to the golf course. Rooms feature heating, minibar, tv and wifi throughout.

#### INCLUDED WITH AIREDALE

- ✓ Return flights and transfers to/from hotel
- ✓ 7 nights' dinner, bed & breakfast with 1/4l water and wine included at dinner
- ✓ Hotel accommodation ✓ All rooms ensuite
- ✓ Private coach travel throughout
- ✓ Services of an English-speaking Tour Manager throughout your stay
- ✓ Excursions as described from your resort

## THE AIREDALE BUCKET LIST



### Lands End to John O'Groats

Travel coast to coast from Land's End to John O'Groats, with an amazing rail journey and Britain's most scenic road trip on a one off, once in a lifetime, grand tour of mainland Britain!

9 DAYS FROM £1299

#### Included Excursions

- Visit charming St Ives, with its beautiful beaches and harbour, continuing to Lands End and Penzance, with St Michael's Mount teasing in the distance
- Enjoy the sensory experience that is the Eden Project
- Marvel at the changing landscapes on a rail journey from Plymouth to northern Scotland
- Tour Royal Deeside, Braemar and Balmoral
- Sample single malts at a Speyside distillery
- Touch the top of the country at John O'Groats, also visiting the Queen Mother's Castle of Mey
- Witness the wonder of Glencoe, this island's most scenic road trip
- Elope for a final night in Gretna

#### INCLUDED WITH AIREDALE

- ✓ Dinner, Bed & Breakfast ✓ Hotel accommodation
- ✓ All rooms ensuite ✓ Private coach travel
- ✓ Services of an experienced driver throughout your stay
- ✓ Excursions from your resorts\*
- ✓ Standard Class rail ticket from Plymouth to Aberdeen
- ✓ Free places in line with our Free Place Policy
- ✓ 6 singles free of supplement

\*Some admission charges may not be included in the holiday price

## THE AIREDALE BUCKET LIST



### Adriatic Adventure & Divine Dalmatia

Here's something very different to tick off your group's bucket list. How about your group's own private chartered sailing boat, gently cruising the Adriatic from divine Dubrovnik through the magical Dalmatian coast to Roman Split, before island-hopping your way back to Dubrovnik?

8 DAYS FROM £1595

#### Included Excursions

- Private chartered small ship cruise
- Gorgeous Korčula Island, birthplace of Marco Polo
- Coastal Makarska with its lovely beach
- Beautiful Brač Island in the glistening Adriatic
- UNESCO World Heritage Split with its Diocletian Palace
- Relax on Golden Horn, Croatia's most beautiful beach
- Visit Hvar Island and the magnificent Hvar Cathedral
- Delight in a day in Dubrovnik

#### INCLUDED WITH AIREDALE

- ✓ Flights to/from Croatia
- ✓ Transfers from airport to ship & return
- ✓ Excursions as described
- ✓ 7 night exclusive cruise on a Premium Superior small ship such as MV Dream in a two-bedded cabin with all meals included
- ✓ Fully equipped cabins have private facilities, air conditioning, safe and hairdryer
- ✓ Air-conditioned dining room with bar and tv. Sundeck with loungers. WIFI free throughout
- ✓ English speaking Tour Manager during the cruise

# AGTO BRANCH NETWORK

## Central Branch

Julia Passmore  
 Sue Day (West Midland Safari Park)  
 Pauline Johnson  
 Jo Blair (Success Tours), Sally Davison,  
 & Stuart Parker (Dunwood Travel)

*Chairman, Treasurer & Board Director*  
*Secretary*  
*Magazine Co-ordinator*  
  
*Committee members*

## Eastern Branch

Catherine Skeggs  
 Enid Pamment  
 Joan Hanks  
 Linda Nicholas  
 Maria Maltby  
 Yvonne Hodson  
 Tony Wright

*Chairman*  
*Vice Chairman*  
*Board Director & Branch Events & Members' Liaison*  
*Treasurer*  
*Secretary*  
*AGTO magazine Co-ordinator & Members' Liaison*  
*Official Branch Photographer/*  
*Branch Web Page Co-ordinator*  
*Committee members*

Jackie Ames & Graham Scrase

## Kent Branch

Jim Silvester  
 Carol Gower  
 Carol Blackmore  
 Eileen Booker & Kath Brown  
 David Steele

*Chairman*  
*Treasurer*  
*Secretary*  
*Committee members*  
*Board Director*

## Northern Branch

John Flynn  
 Avril Redfern  
 Pam Wharton  
 Hazel Jones & Elizabeth Mounser  
 (EM Consultancy)

*Chairman*  
*Treasurer*  
*Secretary*  
  
*Committee members*

## Scotland Branch

Emma McMillan

*Committee member*

## Southern Branch

Sue Povey  
 Anne Barnes  
 Jackie Ring  
 Sylvia Adams & Pat Lake

*Chairman & Board Director*  
*Treasurer*  
*Secretary*  
*Committee members*

## Western Branch

Vacant  
 Gill Brooker  
 Martin Gibson  
 June Coleman, Martin Hay  
 (GoCruise) & Andy Holmes  
 (Norman Allen Group Travel)

*Chairman*  
*Secretary*  
*Treasurer*  
  
*Committee members*

**For contact information, go to the new AGTO website: [www.agto.co.uk](http://www.agto.co.uk)**



# THOUGHTS FROM our Branch Chairs

Welcome to our regular look at what's been happening across the AGTO Branches. In the pages that follow we bring you a selection of stories and reports sent in by members from across the country. But first, here's a round-up of thoughts from our Branch chairs.

**Julia Passmore, chairman of Central Branch, writes:** What mixed messages we are receiving? Being encouraged to venture out, go places and enjoy cut price meals, whilst other places are going back into lockdown and several companies have gone into administration, making worrying times for them and their families and a lot of work for ourselves, if we are doing business with any of them.

And yet we are receiving a lot of interest in visits for 2021, particularly short holidays in the UK. So we are more positively looking to 2021 being brighter and a better year for our groups and the industry as a whole.

Central Branch, through AGTO Associate member Dunwood Travel and Stuart Parker, have arranged to travel to Scarborough, to the Red Lea Hotel, for a fam visit/AGM on Sunday to Wednesday, 7 to 10 February 2021. Already 24 members and guests have paid their deposits for places on the coach. We will now be looking to organise a suitable itinerary to encompass as many places in the area as possible, and to show the amenities that are still able to open and how they are functioning under the new rules. With Stuart Parker of Dunwood Travel organising the event we know we are in good hands.

We hope everyone will continue to stay safe and well, and to find something to entice their group members to want to start travelling again.

Hope to see you all soon.

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**Catherine Skeggs, chairman of Eastern Branch, has been discovering a new online world. She writes:** How is everyone doing? As I write, we've been in lockdown for five months. Who knew it would go on this long? When they said it could last until June, it seemed unbelievable but now June is a distant memory.

While we've been staying home, Eastern Branch have been very proactive. We've continued our committee meetings over Zoom, and Joan Hanks has analysed the geographical locations of groups throughout the branch. I've asked members to complete an online survey and, thanks to the technical expertise of Tony Wright, the committee have been able to share survey results and graphs as well as Joan's detailed maps. Thanks to Tony and Joan for making this happen. As a result we have been kicking around ideas within the committee for places to go and things to do in the future.

Is now the time to plan "our escape"? That's a tough one. Like Rupert Holmes, I like the idea of piña coladas (but not getting caught in the rain) and things are starting to open up again. So how soon do we and our groups venture out?

There are a number of additional things to consider, not just the safety of the destination, but the safety of the transport there and back. It's good to see venues going out of their way to show they're taking precautions. A number have applied for the 'We're Good To Go' official UK mark and even more have increased the information on their websites, detailing what precautions are in place.

We are going to keep our committee meetings alive on Zoom for a while. However, some of our groups are starting to venture out, adding physical events and visits to their online offerings. I've still got one weekend away tentatively booked for Halloween and hope to be able to organise a few Christmas celebrations.

Take care as you plan your escapes and look forward to seeing you in person on the other side.

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**Jim Silvester, chairman of Kent Branch recalls the (almost) carefree days of the AGTO Showcase in Stratford. He writes:** On the day I sat down to write this message



I reflected that a year ago I was about to take my club, HADARA, on a river cruise on the Douro in Portugal. Then I thought about a telephone conversation earlier in the morning when I was informed that the Thursford Christmas Spectacular for 2020 had been cancelled together with my hotel bookings. I'm sure that other GTOs are or have been in similar positions. Oh to return to the good old days!

As a Branch we are endeavouring to stay in touch with our members with regular email updates. Now that the new AGTO website has been launched and with the training session completed I will be able to update the Kent Branch pages.

Amongst the depressing news surrounding the travel industry was the news that British Airways is scrapping its remaining 747 fleet. That sent me into nostalgia.

My first experience of the wonderful 'Jumbo Jet' was in the early 1970s when I was sent to Toronto on a business trip. My boss told me to travel on the August Bank Holiday Monday as there would be more room in the economy section. This wasn't the case. When I boarded the plane to take my seat large parties of French Canadians were insisting that they all sat together. A stewardess asked me and another passenger whether we would be prepared to move seats. I said I hadn't sat down yet so was happy to move whereas the other passenger was reluctant. The stewardess assured us that our changed seats would be more comfortable. We followed her through economy, through the club section and were shown two seats in First Class. What a result. And as an aside it took nearly 40 years until I was upgraded to First Class again!



**Northern Branch's Julie, Gill and Sue at Elizabeth House**



**A year ago members of Kent Branch were in Portugal**

**John Flynn, chairman of Northern Branch, writes:** Many thanks to Jenny Robinson for her wonderful time as chairman of the Northern Branch. We all wish her well. Our thanks also go to Bob Walker who has served on our committee for many years and who has organised countless events and trips for our branch over the years. Bob has stepped down from the committee due to time constraints from his work and family duties.

Now we have reached autumn I think it's time to hopefully look to the future and see if we can turn challenges into opportunities. It has been a long and challenging year. Our industry is beginning to open up and some operators have made baby steps towards operating tours. I do know that Pam, our Branch secretary, is available to look at group trips for our members for 2021.

I am a Trustee for a Wirral Registered Charity which supports long term former carers in Wirral. We normally organise five or six events, mainly day trips, per year. Funding has been particularly difficult in this COVID-19 period but we and many charities have been assisted by organisations such as the National Lottery Community Fund, Steve Morgan Foundation, Bring Joy Foundation, Liverpool C.V.S. and John Moores Foundation stepping in with dedicated supported funds. Last year we were able to organise four day trips courtesy of Ellen Smith Tours to Victorian Manchester, Biddulph Grange and Rudyard Lake Hotel in Staffordshire, Samlesbury Hall and lunch at the Calf's Head in Lancashire, a Kingfisher Canal trip and the lovely Leighton Hall. We're very much looking forward to planning more for 2021.

John Moores Senior set up Littlewoods Pools in the 1930s and the John Moores Foundation was established in 1964 by John Junior and his wife Jane. They have been actively involved in supporting a wide variety of community and voluntary organisations in places such as Northern Ireland, Africa and particularly grassroots services in Merseyside. The family are also associated with both Everton and Liverpool football clubs, which gives me the opportunity to congratulate Liverpool on their Premier League success.

My very best wishes to you all, stay safe and most of all keep well.

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**Sue Povey, chairman of Southern Branch, writes:** When we were all at first in lockdown I don't think any of us quite appreciated how long the crisis would affect our future plans! It has been an extremely difficult time for both the travel industry and those of us organising group travel. It has been good to hear that AGTO has been there, supporting members who have had many queries relating to cancelled holidays with their groups. It is also a timely reminder for us to double check our insurance as, although some companies

have added a limited coronavirus cover now, this appears to only be if you catch the virus whilst already on holiday.

Our Branch members that we have spoken with are still just as enthusiastic about travel and days out. The issue is more that their group members are reluctant to fully commit as yet, especially when they need to pay deposits. Although encouragingly, places are opening up and coaches are finding ways to manage groups, in practice it is still early days for larger numbers to meet. Right now, it seems to be a waiting game. However, there are now many opportunities for visits for individuals or small groups. We have also had lots of time to read through back issues and current issues of group travel magazines for new ideas and for forward planning.

Our future Branch meetings are also on hold. We had planned with the London Transport Museum for a meeting and our AGM to take place in early October. We hope to rearrange a meeting there when it is again possible and intend to hold our AGM before next March at a venue to be arranged. We have used Zoom for our committee meetings and we are now contacting our members with the suggestion of several zoom meetings for members to discuss how they are getting on.

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**Roger Sims, chair of Western Branch, writes:** By the time you read this message I will no longer be a member of AGTO, having chosen not to renew my membership in August and therefore no longer eligible to fulfil the chairman's role in Western Branch. After a significant amount of time involved at National and Branch level my decision to leave has not been easy, but is based on family commitments and health reasons.

As chairman of my local Royal British Legion group it has been increasingly difficult over the last 18 months for the members to commit to trips and tours, primarily for age and health issues.

My AGTO chairman's message over the last year has indicated that although Western Branch membership levels remain constant there is little input or active support from some members for their Branch Committee's endeavours. It is often less than 25% of our total membership, and generally the same faces each time.

We are all aware that since the pandemic started there has been a huge effect on the travel and tourism industry and group travel has been curtailed. However, I believe that given time the industry will bounce back. AGTO as a national body has stepped up, challenged government and been proactive in its approach to ensuring the industry survives. It is now up to the branches to support AGTO, and for individual GTOs to ensure that their branch survives.

# Jim's Daily Lockdown Dittie

**Jim Godsell from Central Branch was wondering how to keep in touch with his group. What he came up with will surely entertain you!**

We are a group of friends who have been having loads of fun over many many years. They are all friends that my wife Denise and I have made over 60 years of marriage, so keeping in touch is vital. Naturally, we are now an aging bunch of chums, a large percentage of whom are well into their eighties. Being house-bound and cut off from all activities has been a challenge, so I

thought that a daily message would be welcome and possibly something to look forward to each day. Well this is how I do it.

Each day I send out a 'Daily Lockdown Dittie'. It could be a joke, a poem, a video, an old picture of a past event, some trivia, a quiz, a conundrum, sayings, puzzles or a reminder of happier times and events. Whatever, as long as it's fun and lifts the spirits. As I write this we've had 17 weeks of lockdown (and 120 daily emails) I haven't yet been stumped for ideas.

Because... when buttons were invented, they were very expensive and worn primarily by the rich. Since most people are right-handed, it is easier to push buttons on the right through holes on the left. Because wealthy women were dressed by maids, dressmakers put the buttons on the maid's right! And that's where women's buttons have remained since.

Why... do ships and aircraft use 'mayday' as their call for help?

Because... this comes from the French word m'aidez - meaning 'help me' - and is pronounced, approximately, 'mayday.'

Why... are zero scores in tennis called 'love'?

Because... in France, where tennis became popular, the round zero on the scoreboard looked like an egg and was called 'l'oeuf,' which is French for 'the egg.' When tennis was introduced in the US, Americans (naturally), mispronounced it 'love.'

Now, I'm thinking that you might want to know the sort of things I've been sending out.

Here's part of today's offering:

Why... do men's clothes have buttons on the right while women's clothes have buttons on the left?



## MAUREEN 'RETIRES' AT 90

**What will you be doing when you reach 90? Eastern Branch says thank you to a special member.**

Maureen Hardingham has been a member of Eastern Branch for well over 20 years. In 2012 she retired as a member of AGTO/GTOA as she no longer qualified as a GTO, her group having been disbanded. However, over the past eight years she has been a 'Friend of Eastern Branch', enabling her to work closely with the Branch committee, contacting new members by telephone on a liaison basis, keeping them up-to-date with events and also to enquire generally about how they are getting on. Now, on reaching her 90th Birthday, she has decided to retire completely from the Association. In wishing her a very happy birthday the Eastern Branch committee, and everyone at AGTO, would like to take this opportunity to thank

her for her many years of involvement and the help she has given to our Eastern Branch members and wish her a well-deserved 'retirement'.



# Which Beatle has the best hair?

**Our GTO members never cease to amaze as they search out new and exciting activities. Jackie Ring, from *Southern Branch*, has found a new idea for your group that could be of interest until physical tours can fully re-start.**

At the beginning of June I'd had many weeks when I'd had only myself for company at home, or had been out walking with just one companion. I'd taken part in Zoom meetings, which many of us have learnt how to do, although to be honest, the conversation could be quite limited – "Seen any good shows?" "No!", or even "Going somewhere nice on holiday?" "No!"

The topics seemed to have become more about us arguing how we interpreted the rules differently, and how many people were allowed in our bubbles, etc.

So I was pleased to receive an email alert about the Virtual 60s Bus Tour around Swinging London. This struck me as a good way to 'get out' at last, but also in the company of my 'virtual friends'. So I emailed a dozen or so of my group and we booked ourselves onto the tour. There's a limited number on a public tour, so it was almost a private tour for us, with just two members of the public also signed up. This is an actual live tour where we watch and interact using Zoom, not a recorded tour which you just watch like many of the other things online are.

Paul, our driver and guide, was very knowledgeable and drove us round the streets of West London, pointing out the various places where famous faces from the '60s used to hang out (or

was it 'drop out?'), including the Rolling Stones, The Beatles and fashion models. He pointed out the houses where the best parties were held, and arrests made, and also the clubs such as the Troubadour, and fashion shop Granny Takes a Trip.

During the tour we could see and speak to each other; we weren't just sitting watching Paul. There's usually a 'special guest' on the trip – and we had the Beatles hairdresser join us. He was able to tell us some personal stories of the people he'd met which brought them and the places very much alive. He answered our questions too.

Q: Which Beatle had the best hair? A: Paul.

It was lovely to see the streets of London again, as I regularly go to shows or visits with my group and had missed these. Although it was odd to see an eerily quiet Royal Albert Hall without a single coach parked outside collecting its passengers.

The evening of our trip happened to be the wettest of the summer, with storms and hailstones, but that wasn't a problem. In fact we said it was nice not to have to traipse back to Waterloo station trying to avoid the puddles. Another advantage was that we could have a glass or two of wine while 'on the bus', with our dinners in the oven!

After the tour we all returned to Zoom for a meeting and it was so nice to be able to chat about something we had actually done together.

The tour cost is £10 per person and this will be taken off a physical tour in the future. There are other tour options available on different days, so do check the website, and Paul will arrange a private group tour if that's what you'd like to have.

For details, go to [www.60sbus.london](http://www.60sbus.london)

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## PERSONAL STORIES FROM JIMMY MAC'S

**Diane Duff, from *Eastern Branch*, is centre manager at Jimmy Mac's Activity Centre in Hatfield, Hertfordshire. Together with her colleague Trish Creed, and in the absence of being able to organise any outings, they've been chatting with clients. Here are just a few of their stories.**

Many of our clients talk about their children and grandchildren. It's been hard for them not being able to see them (until recently). One lady has a son who has lived in Venezuela for over 20 years and she hadn't seen him in all that time. He arrived in the UK to visit

and stayed with her daughter who lives quite a distance away. But this was just as lockdown started and he had to stay there, so until recently she was still unable to visit him, which was so sad. Others have been luckier and have had short doorstep visits from family, but for many there is nobody nearby or no family at all. That's why our phone calls have been so important to them.

One lady said that her husband was in a nursing home nearby. Unfortunately he has dementia but she was able to Facetime him. He was quite happy with this because he thought she was on holiday in Spain.

I speak to one disabled man every week. He's a Tottenham supporter and I'm an ardent Arsenal fan so every Friday we have a catch up about the football and good naturedly insult each other. But I know he really looks forward to our chats and our very important football analysis.

One lady was telling me that she was widowed at 38 years old. Her husband was in the Navy and worked as a stoker in the boiler room. He was affected by the asbestos that was in the pipes and died aged just 42. She was told she wasn't entitled to a widow's pension as she was too young and she never

received any compensation for the asbestos poisoning which took his life. She's now 88 and had to look after herself until she retired. She never remarried as she said she would never be that lucky again to find the happiness she had with him. She only recently found out that she was entitled to get her rent paid and she said she can now

afford a few more things that she's gone without for so long. What a brave lady.

Many of our clients have kept themselves busy during lockdown. One man is a talented artist and most days has been putting a song on Facebook for us to listen to.

Most of our planned day trips and

holidays with Jimmy Mac's have been cancelled this year but we are all hoping that it won't be too long before we can get back together. One thing's for certain, there'll be one hell of a knees up when that happens!

For details about Jimmy Macs go to [www.jimmymacs.org.uk](http://www.jimmymacs.org.uk)

# A LAKE DISTRICT ADVENTURE

**The Lake District is famous for looking magnificent whatever time of year you visit. For Martin Gibson of Western Branch, flooding, sleet and snow simply added to the adventure.**

Back in February I took my group from Exeter to Grange-over-Sands in the Lake District for a long week-end. We had had so much rain that the majority of the country was waterlogged. The day prior to departure I received notification assuring us that our hotel was perfectly safe, but some local roads may be affected.

Departure day dawned and I was confident my planning was all in place. But as the last few passengers boarded the coach, turmoil broke out. I discovered that the coach company had supplied a 51-seat coach instead of the 53-seater I was expecting. My carefully planned seating plan was ruined. Thankfully, due to a couple of absentees I was able to move people around to keep everyone happy.

Our driver Ian turned out to be a very friendly character who soon won the affection of our group with his comical tales of previous trips and jokes.

Our hotel was the 3-star Cumbria Grand Hotel. This Victorian hotel, built in 1880 and set in 20 acres of private gardens and woodlands, sits on a slightly elevated position, overlooking the golf club and Morecambe Bay. After a warm welcome by the assistant manager we headed to our rooms. One couple didn't like their allocated room, complained, and were highly delighted to be moved to a large sea-view room with four-poster bed. I hope they don't expect this on all future trips!

From our own room we could look out over the sea. In the foreground the golf course was under approximately three feet of flood water leaving the club house marooned.

Our DB&B and packed lunch package included a drinks



voucher covering two free alcoholic drinks and one non-alcoholic drink per day for each of our group.

On the Saturday we made our way to Kendal passing waterlogged fields in every direction. This was a day for the ladies with time to browse in five shopping arcades in the newly pedestrianised town centre. The chilly wind however was enough for everyone to make for the shelter of the shops and cafes.

On the Sunday we headed for Windermere, encountering wind, rain, hail and sleet. When the snow started we once again made our way into the warmth of the local cafés. From Windermere it was on to Keswick before proceeding to Cockermouth where the majority of the group made their way to a famous pub, 'The Bitter End'.

On the Monday morning we awoke to see a landscape covered in a layer of snow. When I advised a breakfast waitress that we were due to catch the Lake Windermere cruise boat out of Ambleside at 9.45am, she laughed saying we would be lucky to get down the hotel drive! But Ian knew what he was doing, although a snow-laden overhanging branch took out the nearside coach mirror. We made the boat by the skin of our teeth! It was sleeting again by now and the bartender was overwhelmed with orders for coffee topped up with a wee dram. Several of us ventured out on deck to capture photographs of the white scenery as we cruised towards Lakeside. Ian met us with the coach and took us to



the Lakeside Motor Museum with its 30,000 exhibits and the excellent Donald Campbell Bluebird Exhibition.

Tuesday was home day with all on board saying how much they had enjoyed the trip, despite the weather.

I'd like to thank Eiron and Lynne of Majestic Tours, an AGTO Associate member, for arranging this memorable trip.

## The Unusual and Little Known

**Anne Barnes, treasurer of Southern Branch, is secretary of The Comets, the Metropolitan Police Sports and Social Association. She takes a look at some of the more unusual places she's taken groups to in the London area.**

My group love unusual tours because it is often something that they would not have done themselves or might not have known about. A unique event will often be accompanied by an increase in membership as people talk about the experience to others. During the lockdown I have reviewed some of the unusual tours and events I have organised over the last fifteen years. I would like to revisit them if they have survived the effects of the pandemic because these venues need our support more than ever.

If any of these take your fancy then please check accessibility of the sites because some of them are small, very old, have uneven floors, do not have lifts or are working premises that did not have visitors in mind when they were built. Limited capacity at some venues meant that we had to split the groups and in some cases had to book several different entry times.

### DENNIS SEVERS HOUSE – CENTRAL LONDON

The Huguenot silk-weaver's house recreates a snapshot of life in Spitalfields in central London between 1724 and 1914. Dennis Severs, an artist who lived in the house, aptly called it a 'still-life drama'. The rooms are candle lit and there is sometimes a fire in the hearth. The smells, sights, sounds and intriguing objects scattered everywhere add to the atmosphere as you walk through.

18 Folgate Street, Spitalfields, London.  
[www.dennissevershouse.co.uk](http://www.dennissevershouse.co.uk)

### 'BEHIND THE SEAMS' AT ANGELS COSTUMES TOUR – HENDON, NORTH LONDON

Angels is the 'world's largest costume house'. The tour showcases the company's extensive costume collection, which spans 10 miles of rails of hanging costumes, and over one million items. On the guided tour you'll visit the various departments including Tailoring, Ladies Making, Alterations, Uniform, Badge Room and Warehouse. There's a delightful display of clothes made or recreated for Benedict Cumberbatch, Judi Dench, Fred Astaire, Johnny Depp, Cate Blanchett and many

more. You'll hear first-hand accounts of working on the biggest productions such as *Shakespeare in Love*, *The Lady in the Van*, *Downton Abbey*, *Wicked* and *Game of Thrones*. For a change, it is a venue where they don't mind if you touch the exhibits or take photographs.

1 Garrick Road, Hendon, London.  
[www.angels.co.uk/tours](http://www.angels.co.uk/tours)

### ALDWYCH UNDERGROUND STATION – CENTRAL LONDON

This is a guided tour of an abandoned Underground station that is often featured in films and television programmes. The station was opened to the public in 1907 and closed in 1994 and has an interesting history. Many of its original features such as the tiled walls and the wooden framed ticket booths are still there. Some of the platforms still display wartime signs and 1970's posters. The tour operates infrequently so you must keep an eye on the London Transport Museum website or the Brit Movies website for the advert and buy the tickets as soon as you can.

[www.ltmuseum.co.uk/whats-on/hidden-london](http://www.ltmuseum.co.uk/whats-on/hidden-london) or

[www.britmovietours.com/bookings/aldwych-strand-station-tour](http://www.britmovietours.com/bookings/aldwych-strand-station-tour)

## LONDON TRANSPORT MUSEUM DEPOT – ACTON, WEST LONDON

This venue is full of trains, trams, buses, trolleybuses, carriages, signals and signs which are part of the London Transport Museum's collection which cannot be housed at the Covent Garden museum. Acton is a warehouse, museum and workshop with an education space. It is open to the public for special events including Open Weekends, held three times a year, and for pre-booked guided tours. Also at the Depot is the London Transport Miniature Railway, a working railway based on real London Underground locomotives, carriages, signals and signs.

118 Gunnersbury Lane, Acton, London.

[www.ltmuseum.co.uk/visit/museum-depot](http://www.ltmuseum.co.uk/visit/museum-depot)

## CHISLEHURST CAVES – CHISLEHURST, KENT

The caves, carved out over hundreds of years, are a labyrinth of man-made tunnels, up to 30 metres below the homes and woodlands above. The caves were dug for chalk used in lime burning and brick making for the building of London, as well as for flints to fire the tinderboxes and flintlock guns of years ago. The caves were first open to the public in 1900. The guides tell the Victorian's history of Romans, Druids and Saxons, smuggling and murder. The last 100 years has added munitions storage for the Woolwich Arsenal in the First World War, mushroom growing in the 1920s and 1930s and becoming an underground town as the largest deep air-raid shelter outside London, protecting over 15,000 people every night during the Blitz in the Second World War. In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s the caves were used as a venue for dances and concerts, presenting the foundations of Jazz, Skiffle and Folk music to the most famous names in pop and rock. You will need to take a guided tour because the caves

are a labyrinth of dark mysterious passageways which you would be unlikely to find your way through unaided. Anyway, it is much more fun to have a guide telling you of the fascinating history and perhaps ghost stories of the caves. So that you can get the right atmosphere the lighting in the caves is kept to a minimum. Sometimes it is pitch black so for health and safety reasons you will be given a lamp to help you.

Old Hill, Chislehurst, Kent.

[www.chislehurst-caves.co.uk](http://www.chislehurst-caves.co.uk)

## BEEFEATER GIN DISTILLERY TOUR – KENNINGTON, SOUTH LONDON

You have half an hour to browse through the museum section, which takes you through the history of gin in London. Learn the story of the import of the exotic ingredients, the effects of prohibition on the gin trade and view a display of posters and gin bottles. I always feel that half an hour is never enough! When Parliament passed a law in 1737 which rewarded informants who reported black market activities, gin sellers found remarkably inventive ways to ply their trade. The cat featured in the photograph allowed customers to place coins in the mouth of the cat and the gin would be dispensed through a lead pipe under its paw.

During the guided tour you'll learn about the hand-crafted



production process, touch and smell the ingredients, see the stills and then enjoy a complementary gin and tonic or soft drink.

20 Montford Place, London.  
[www.beefeaterdistillery.com](http://www.beefeaterdistillery.com)

### UP AT THE O2 – CLIMBING THE DOME – GREENWICH, LONDON

This is a 90-minute activity with time to stop on the viewing platform at the top to admire the 360 degree view of London. It was a bit wet on the day that my group went, but it didn't stop my members from enjoying this exhilarating experience. It is advisable to wear warm clothing that covers your arms and legs, even in good weather, because it can be quite breezy up there. A level of fitness is required for walking up the soft, sloping ramp for at least half an hour. You are secured with a safety harness for the ascent and descent, but once on the top viewing platform you can wander around at will. The ramp that you take up and down feels like a trampoline, but you are not permitted to bounce on it!

The o2, North Greenwich, East London.

[www.tickets.aegeurope.com/  
upattheo2/private-corporate-climbs](http://www.tickets.aegeurope.com/upattheo2/private-corporate-climbs)



# TISSINGTON DELIVERS THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

**Doug Spencer, from Central Branch, who normally organises monthly trips for the Matlock Travel Society, kindly responded to our request to send in reports from recent trips with a look back at many of the places the group visited during 2019. We'll be featuring more of his reports in future issues of the AGTO Magazine, but to get the ball rolling here's what he had to say about a visit last December to one of Derbyshire's best-known attractions.**

Our final visit of the season was to Tissington Hall which was built in 1609 by Francis FitzHerbert to replace the moated fortification that guarded the Norman Church of St Mary's in the centre of the village. For over 400 years the Hall has presided over this picturesque Estate Village which is five

miles north of the delightful market town of Ashbourne at the southern tip of the Peak District. Sir Richard FitzHerbert inherited the estate and hall in 1989. He lives there with his wife Fiona and it is a home to the four children, six dogs, two cats and a plethora of other animals. Tissington Hall, with its rich history dating back to the eleventh century, is unique in that it is one of only 300 homes in the country that can boast the fact that the descendants of the original builder still live there, 400 years later. Last year's Christmas theme was 'Star of Wonder' where you could walk in a winter wonderland celebrating a medley of Christmas music through the ages.

After a warm and personal welcome by Sir Richard FitzHerbert, we made our way through a series of beautifully



decorated rooms, (see phone left), each one dressed to portray a particular carol. Wandering through the many rooms we listened to *Away in a Manger* (in a stable), gasped at the riches of the 'Three Kings' and the lavish table of 'King Wenceslas' and read the parchment scrolls giving the history and origin of the carols.

Leaving the Hall we walked to the Village Hall where, after pulling our crackers and laughing or groaning at the riddles, we enjoyed our tasty Christmas lunch.

After lunch we visited the church and, as the sun had chased away most of the early mist, the crisp afternoon was just right for a brisk walk around the village where, on a day like this, our imaginations could easily take us back in time to Christmases long ago.

We all had a wonderful day out and agree that this was one of the best Christmas experiences we have had in our years as a society. We may not visit again as a group but many of us will definitely be back again next year.

On boarding the coach for home we found that our driver Jeff had hung tasteful Christmas decorations and we had a pleasant drive home to the sound of Christmas carols – a fitting start to the coming holiday.

## A flying visit to Stow Maries aerodrome

**A visit to Stow Maries during 2019 proved to be quite an experience for the members of *Eastern Branch*. Enid Pamment, vice chairman, explains.**

Shefford Leisure Group visited the Mess Hall of Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome, near Maldon in Essex. I had no idea it would prove so interesting, with stories of smuggling and piracy, told to us by a superb Blue Badge Guide. We explored



**In the summer issue we carried a story from Helen Sims about a group visit to Delft in the Netherlands. This was something of a surprise for Helen as the report was actually written by Gill Brooker. Apologies for causing mild heart attacks in Western Branch. To prove she was there, Gill has kindly supplied this photo taken whilst in a restaurant in Delft. She says that she had to walk through the Gents to reach the Ladies!**



life in the Royal Flying Corps as it was a century ago, and had lunch, which was home cooked and huge! Afterwards we left the Mess together with its century-old music and decorations, and we were invited to view the hangers with the original aircraft (still flying). My, what an experience!

After our thanks to the very informative voluntary staff we made our way to the Royal Burnham Yacht Club in Burnham-on-Crouch. The tea room is the width of the Yacht Club, overlooking the salt marshes of Dengie Hundred. Whilst there we were provided with tea and coffee and an enormous piece of delicious cake!

With all this food I guess our Landmark coach was much heavier going home. Should it have been weighed? Our thanks must go to AGTO Associate member City & Village Tours for arranging this superb day for us.



## Archimedes appears at Cragside

**A visit to a National Trust property can sometimes produce a surprise or two. But for Pauline Johnson of Central Branch, a visit to Cragside in Northumberland produced something completely unexpected.**

One day of our tour of Northumbria a few years ago was devoted to the National Trust's Cragside property, which we were all looking forward to visiting. Our two coaches had just set out from the hotel when I received an urgent call from the property manager. We needed to park in a different area as the road over the dam was closed and the other route into the property was too far to walk and not suitable for large coaches.

When we arrived three minibuses were parked up ready to take us in relays to the visitor centre including an easy access bus with two wheelchairs as we had some passengers with limited mobility. The staff who were meeting us were very excited as the reason for the road over the dam being closed (the lake had been drained in preparation) was the installation of a 55-foot Archimedes screw, a 17 metre-long galvanised turbine weighing several tonnes. We were going to be a part of

history-in-the-making at Cragside. The property was going back to generating its own hydro-electric power as in the days of Sir William Armstrong.

We had passed the Dutch low-loader lorry as we arrived, a very impressive sight. Things didn't go entirely according to plan though as the lorry driver didn't quite get the angle right when reversing onto the bridge to unload the mobile crane's counter-weights. He got completely stuck on the slope, which all added to the drama. During the day in between visiting the

house and exploring the gardens we watched firstly as the mobile crane rescued its support lorry and then as the Archimedes Screw was unloaded. Then in the late afternoon it was lowered into place at the sluice gate.

From the project manager downwards all involved were happy to answer any questions from interested visitors. When the staff said how worried they had been that it might spoil our enjoyment of Cragside we happily disillusioned them. For us it was the icing on the cake.



# A TALK, A CHAT AND A QUIZ

**Robert Coleman from *Eastern Group*, and organiser for *The London Cultureseekers Group*, has been busy during lockdown organising chats and quizzes. He explains what he's been doing.**

Since lockdown started back in March and not being able to do any face to face events, I knew it would be important to stay in touch with my members. Pre-lockdown, I was organising three or four events a week, including museum or gallery visits, day trips by coach or train, guided walks, and socials, meals or coffee evenings. But which of these could I do online?

I quickly discovered the video chat website Zoom and have stuck with it. I upgraded from free usage, with a maximum call duration of 45 minutes, to paying £14 a month, with no time restriction.

I started doing weekly online coffee evenings on a Wednesday evening for an hour. These were just general socials to chat about things and were good to keep in touch with my members. I'd also limit the numbers to 15 people, so everyone had the chance to speak.

In the second week of lockdown, I started hosting quizzes on a Saturday afternoon and have continued to do this all through lockdown. We're a London-based history and culture group so not unsurprisingly I focus the quiz questions on London's history and culture. This keeps people learning and the quiz relevant to what the group does in normal circumstances.

In the third week of lockdown, I started a series of talks every Thursday evening on famous people in British history. I researched, prepared and hosted the talks myself. Each talk lasts an hour with time for questions and discussion afterwards. Although I have done some talks with my group in previous years in function rooms of pubs in central London, they are better suited to do online, as it's easy to share your screen in Zoom and display images or show a PowerPoint



presentation. Over the weeks I've spoken about everyone from Henry VIII to Mary Shelley to Oscar Wilde. So far, since the beginning of lockdown I've done 48 online events for my group, with 1,460 members attending. I've also continued to send out my monthly newsletter to my group to keep in touch and offer support to those feeling isolated.

Going forward, I'm planning to slowly do some face-to-face events, but will continue to do online events until the end of the year. For the face-to-face events, I'll be doing outside events only with a limited number of people, with everyone socially distancing and wearing facemasks.



# DISCOVERING THE REME MUSEUM AND BLETCHLEY PARK

**June Coleman and Christine Hewitt of Western Branch report on the final trips they enjoyed with their group this year before lockdown brought everything to a halt.**

Each year we take some of our group, the Westland Retirement Association, to the Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff. In January we saw the Cameron Mackintosh touring production of *Les Misérables*. Some of us had seen the show before but it was an excellent production and we all enjoyed it.

In February we went to the REME Museum at MOD Lyneham, the former site of RAF Lyneham which closed in 2012. We arrived late due to roadworks and an unexpected 20-mile diversion, which did allow us to see parts of Wiltshire we weren't familiar with! For the coach driver it was something of a nightmare. When we finally arrived everyone headed straight to the restaurant for badly-needed drinks and food. We're pleased to say we found the food and service to be excellent. The museum was very interesting, and contained an array of very interesting

exhibits. After this we drove in to Swindon for shopping.

In early March we went to Bletchley Park, home of the codebreakers in the Second World War. We saw how the codes were broken and learnt the stories of some of the extremely clever people, including Alan Turing, (photo centre above), whose work went a long way towards helping us to win the war.

Unfortunately, holidays to Liverpool and Guernsey, and a river cruise on the Danube, have been cancelled. Everything's up in the air at the moment. We're keeping our fingers crossed that a 'Turkey and Tinsel' break to AGTO Associate member Warner Leisure Hotels' Alvaston Hall Hotel in Cheshire in November will go ahead.



June enjoying her visit to Bletchley Park

# Lord Dartmouth's baked potatoes!

**Sandwell, the metropolitan district that includes West Bromwich in the West Midlands, might not be well known to many GTOs. But as Anna Hallett of *Central Branch* recounts, the area is well worth taking a closer look at.**

In April 2019 the Lichfield History Group spent an enjoyable day in Sandwell in the West Midlands visiting three fascinating properties.

Our first port of call was Sandwell Park Farm, formerly the home farm of Sandwell Hall, owned by Lord Dartmouth. Here we enjoyed looking at the various animals housed in the buildings surrounding the nineteenth-century farmyard, as well as the walled garden and greenhouses, tended along Victorian lines.

After lunch (the baked potatoes were declared 'the best ever', piping hot as they had been prepared to be ready for the pre-booked time) we visited a small museum. Here we looked at items connected with the medieval abbey that occupied the site before it was built over by Lord Dartmouth. A short walk then brought us to the remains of the religious structures, close to the sandy well near which it was built. Passing the remnants of the gardens formerly belonging to the demolished eighteenth century Hall, we discovered a large number of herons occupying the trees surrounding the two pools, which in earlier times had provided the monks with fish. An icehouse and an avenue of sweet chestnuts are further features to be explored, as are the remains of a tramway and two bridges used for the transport of coal from a nearby pit.

Our next stop was at West Bromwich Manor House,

considered to be one of the most important surviving medieval timber-framed buildings in the Midlands, dating to the 1270s. Empty at the moment, until some years ago the building was a public house and prestigious restaurant, frequented by famous footballers, we were told. It is surrounded by a moat and is approached via an impressive gatehouse. In the Great Hall, kitchen, chapel and various other rooms the structure of this amazing building is clearly visible, and therefore of great interest to students of architecture.

Finally we made our way to the Oak House, described as a 'spectacular', if not large, timber-framed, gabled house, topped by 'a curious tower with two gables', dating to the sixteenth century. This is fully furnished and, to the delight of some of us, featured a special embroidery exhibition. A guide was at hand to answer any queries we might have. Whilst some members enjoyed a cup of tea and a cake, others strolled about the formal garden behind the house.

Apart from a small entrance fee and parking charge at the farm there were no other expenses. The only problem to be aware of is the lack of a car park at the Oak House, which is surrounded by streets of private houses. However, our excellent driver (of South Staffs Coach Hire) dropped us off and picked us up some time later. It is important to check opening times, particularly of the Manor House which is often closed.

At the end of the day we had travelled from the Middle Ages via the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the present, enjoying interesting buildings and gardens and the natural world of woods, pools and wildlife.

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## SLEEPING IN YOUR OWN BEDS!

**When members of a group generally prefer to sleep in their own beds it limits opportunities for trips that require an overnight stay. But as Yvonne Hodson from *Eastern Branch* explains, that means the focus is on a great day out**

Like most groups at the moment, my group, Exel RSA in Bedford, just can't

wait for the time when we can travel again. The age range of my group is mixed; some members say that they prefer to sleep in their own bed and because of this I only arrange day trips. What they do like however is to have an enjoyable day out, travelling in a comfortable coach, with commentary by a knowledgeable guide, and finally lunching together in a country pub or

restaurant. We do however also cater for our more adventurous members who enjoy visiting all that our region, and our neighbouring regions, have to offer. It's so rewarding as an organiser when you are able to please everyone and I'm really looking forward to the day when I can head off with my group to enjoy more memorable experiences.

# Solving crime, one Zoom at a time!

**Murder mysteries have been popular with groups for many years. But what's happened during lockdown? Catherine Skeggs, chairman of Eastern Branch, looks at the evidence.**

During the lockdown a lot of things that my group, City Adventurers, used to do in real life migrated online, including murder mysteries. Established murder mystery companies have employed different approaches on how they offer interactive events over the internet. Often they use isolated actors performing the script. One company even used one actor playing all the parts!

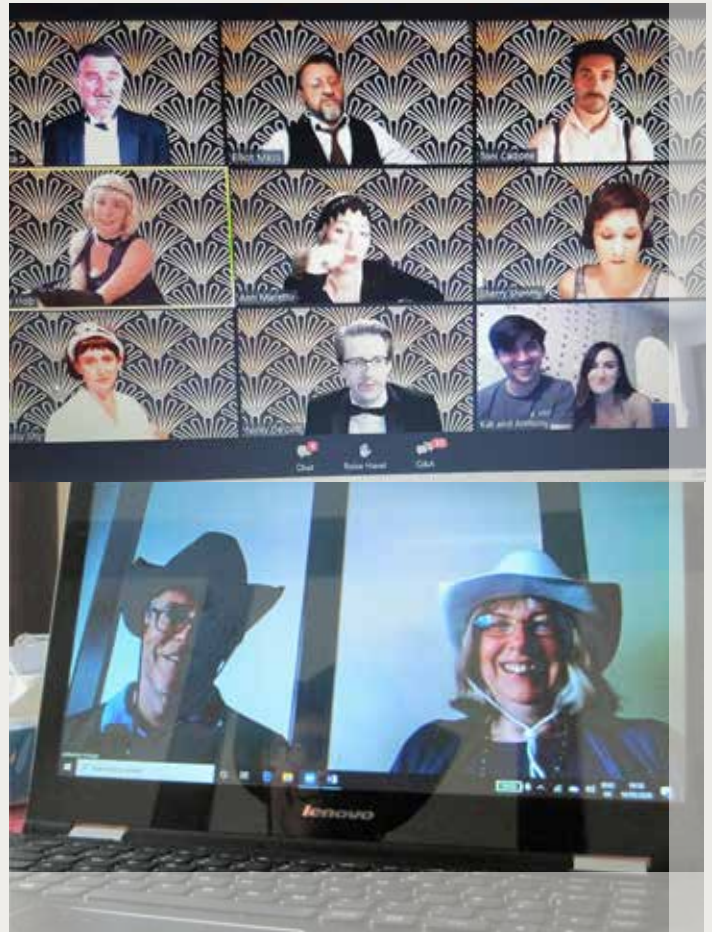
Some allow the audience to ask questions via a chat function. Others allow the audience to question the suspects directly on Zoom. As time has gone on, the companies have become more adept at running their events. Just as we've had to learn to embrace the technology, so have they. Today the online murder mysteries are much slicker now than when they started.

The companies have also built up a loyal, often international, following. This can be a blessing and a curse. Great that they are reaching audiences worldwide, but the pressure is on to keep producing new adventures.

How have my group enjoyed the online adventures? Well, it's fair to say they have had a mixed response. We've enjoyed every minute of it, but some members prefer live events.

Financially, online murders are a lot cheaper to attend. Tickets are usually priced per household/per device. So you can have one person or a whole family taking part for less than the price of one ticket to the theatre. For a group this is great. It is not so good for people living alone, as you miss debating the clues with others.

One company, Murdered for Money, spread its mysteries over four to seven days, with daily videos being released. Some of the isolated City Adventurers were able to group together and discuss the clues offline, making it more of a group event. Another company, Moonstone Murder Mysteries, performed



two series of weekly events on YouTube. They'd built up a loyal audience that made friends and interacted over the chat box.

As lockdown eased, the companies had to decide if they would continue online or not. They all expressed a desire to return to live performances, but luckily some are continuing to offer online events as well.

Red Herring Games also offered to run fundraising murder mysteries for small charities. City Adventurers took the company up on this offer to raise money for Cancer Support with 'Murder at the Grand' in August.

Stay safe and keep sleuthing.

## Meeting your MP in Parliament

**Talking with your local MP to arrange a visit to the Houses of Parliament in London might seem like quite a challenge. But as Jackie Ring from Southern Branch reveals, it's all in the planning.**

*"A week is a long time in politics"* is a phrase usually attributed to former Prime Minister Harold Wilson. But how true it has proved to be as we've seen so many changes over the last few months in Parliament as well as society

in general. The opportunity to arrange a visit to the Houses of Parliament was initially discussed last autumn while Guildford's then MP, Anne Milton, attended a U3A Open Day meeting. She suggested that her office could

arrange 'democratic access tours' for our members. These are an opportunity for UK citizens to find out more about the workings of the UK Parliament, its history and its relevance today, plus the chance to view the two Chambers (the House of Commons and the House of Lords), the Queen's Robing Room, Central Lobby, that we've seen so much of as a backdrop on the TV news broadcasts, and possibly spot 'famous faces' too.

Tours can also be arranged during weekends or in the summer recess, when visitors have access to additional areas, and perhaps a tea overlooking the Thames can be arranged. But with our organisation's ethos that activities should be educational as well as enjoyable, our tours were the chance to see the building 'at work'.

As over 170 members applied and each trip was limited to 25 due to the maximum allowed for reserved seating in the galleries, I arranged six dates between November and February to cope with this number. Then, after just one trip in November, the General Election was called and three of these trips were postponed until March. And then a brand new MP was elected, Angela Richardson. Then the final trip, due to take place at the end of March just after Parliament closed down, was a casualty of the pandemic and has been

postponed again.

These tours can be on other days, but I arranged ours for Mondays and timed them to be in the late morning so that we could then watch the Speaker's Procession go into the Commons to commence the afternoon session. The procession only last two minutes but is worth it just to see how these traditions continue. We could then go into the Public Viewing Gallery of either the Commons or the Lords to watch the debates and questions. If someone is interested in seeing the workings of a particular Committee, then that could be possible too, depending on what is timetabled for that particular day.

We've seen different things on different days - including speeches given by the candidates up for the role of new Speaker, debates on a variety of topics such as the *State of the High Street*, the *Effect of Brexit on the European Arrest Warrant*, questions on Fishing, and discussions right at the beginning of the situation with Coronavirus. Full printed details are issued on the day so it's quite easy to follow what topics are being covered. Some members met Betty Boothroyd, a former Speaker of the Commons, who chatted to them in Central Lobby, and others saw when Corbyn and Gove had a 'set-to'.

It was also interesting to see *New Dawn*, a light sculpture created by

Surrey artist Mary Branson, where the lights change colour in an intriguing way. This new artwork commemorates not only women's suffrage, but stands for all men and women who struggle to get a vote. All of the guides have been excellent, each with their own slant on things and telling different stories which brought the place alive, such as how the Queen bumped into a cleaner on her way to the State Opening of Parliament when she was sent to the wrong floor in the lift, and how she never forgot to ask after her on every visit. One guide told us under which floor the barrels of gunpowder were found, how the term 'three line whip' came about, and the origins of the Houses of Parliament symbol of the portcullis.

All of these visits have proved to be very successful and enjoyable, with everyone saying how much they had learnt. Some people even booked to go on a second visit so they could see something different. We do, of course, have one more visit due to go, and I'll be arranging a new date as soon as I can. I also spoke to Joanna Freeman, the groups and travel trade representative at the Houses of Parliament while at the AGTO Showcase Weekend in January and she was hopeful then that a new tour of the artwork at Portcullis House could be on the cards for the future. That is something my group would definitely be interested in doing.



Jackie Ring (second left) and members of Southern Branch meet Angela Richardson MP (centre).

# No mystery about Gerry's success

**When you organise a mystery tour it's good to have a few surprises up your sleeve. That was certainly the case for Gerry March of Kent Branch.**

Setting off at 7.30am from Orpington in Kent, with comments of "Why are we leaving so early?" we set course for Chichester (via Arundel just to confuse). We arrived at Chichester Sailing Club where I had pre-booked on arrival bacon butties, tea and coffee at the club restaurant. As we looked out on to the river admiring the views, a boat came into view and tied up on the jetty.

"Oh, that looks a nice boat," I heard one of my group say. "Yes," I said, smiling, "it is a nice boat and you are all going on it for a 'Titanic cruise'." So all aboard and we set sail up river to Dell Quay, enjoying the skipper's excellent commentary, before turning and returning down river to the entrance to Chichester Harbour finishing at Itchenor Quay.

Coming ashore we made our way up to the Ship Inn for a comfort stop and refreshments. All aboard again on our coach and we set off to Portsmouth, or that's what my group thought!

Having gone around several roundabouts to confuse everyone we arrived at Goodwood House. We were greeted by two house guides who gave us a very interesting tour ending in the Grand Hall where laid out on decorative round tables was afternoon tea at its very best. We finished out on the lawn with a group photo. A delightful day and blessed with good weather. On arriving home everyone stepping off the coach forgave us for the early start. "What a day!"

## EXPERIENCING THE GCR UNDER COVID-19 REGULATIONS

**Pauline Johnson of Central Branch reports on a visit to the Great Central Railway in Leicestershire on the first day of services since lockdown.**

On Saturday 25 July the Great Central Railway (GCR) started operating steam-hauled trains again and my husband Ken and I managed to get tickets for the 11.50am departure from Quorn and Woodhouse station, one of three departures operating on the day.

Our online ticket gave specific instructions regarding the wearing of face coverings on the station platform, and the carriage and compartment that we had been allocated. The train had five carriages with compartments so that you were able to social distance comfortably within your social/family 'bubble'.

The café was open and one way systems were in operation. In the station yard there were a couple of steam traction engines, several vintage cars and a Black Five steam locomotive to hold your interest while you waited for the train to arrive.

The GCR normally operates between Loughborough Central and Leicester North. The railway had identified that the design of the station at Loughborough didn't lend itself to social distancing, so the only station you can board the train is at Quorn. The train then does a return journey to Leicester North, where you can disembark, as long as you put your masks back on, to watch the engine run round.



No one is allowed onto the platform at Quorn until the train arrives back from Loughborough where it goes after each journey to be thoroughly cleaned by the carriage stewards. Entrance to each carriage is by the middle door marked by a milk churn and there is a one-way system there as well. On return to Quorn you have to stay in your compartment until the staff tell you, so that they can disembark everyone compartment by compartment.

It all works very well, the rain stayed away, families were out in manageable numbers and everyone was enjoying themselves. It almost felt like normality had returned. I'm now talking with the GCR team to see how we can make a group trip later in the year.





AGTO and Doucas Tours & Travel present

## 'Unexpected Experiences in Central Macedonia, Greece'



A six-day fam trip for group organisers

**19 to 24 April 2021**

Imagine beautiful high quality coasts and beaches, the mythical and historic Mount Olympus and Mount Athos, the Roman, Byzantine and modern cultural heritage of Thessaloniki, the rich ecosystems of lakes and rivers, and the uplands and mountainous areas of natural beauty. This is the Greek region of Central Macedonia, one of the most important tourism destinations in Europe and worldwide.

### Here are the key elements of the itinerary:

Day 1: Fly to Thessaloniki and check in to your hotel.

Day 2: Full day tour discovering Thessaloniki's vibrant history.

Day 3: Visit Imathia, the land of King Phillip II. Explore the city of Veria, where Apostle Paul preached. Visit the Aigai (Vergina) Museum of the Royal Tombs. Enjoy wine tasting at a local winery. Visit the historic town of Naoussa. Overnight in Naoussa.

Day 4: Visit Pella region, the birthplace of Alexander the Great. Explore the town of Edessa and its famous waterfalls. Visit the natural thermal springs of Aridea, the Archaeological Museum and site of Pella. Overnight in Thessaloniki.

Day 5: The Serres and Kilkis regions neighbouring Thessaloniki provide the theatre for the deadliest battles that started to change the outcome of the First World War. Today the regions are known as places of remembrance for those who lost their lives from Britain, the Commonwealth and the wider world.

Visit the Roupel Bunkers, the defense line in both the First and Second World Wars (the battles took place during WWII). Go boating on Kerkini Lake, an important wetland. Visit the Kilkis region and the British Memorial and Military Cemetery of the Battle of Doirani.

Day 6: Fly home.

### Who can apply?

Applications are invited from AGTO group organiser members with a group of 20 or more who have organised at least three continental tours by air during the last four years. Only one representative of a group should apply (ie no couples or friends).

### What's included?

Five night's accommodation in three hotels – Thessaloniki (2), Naoussa (1) and Thessaloniki (2). Transfers, meals, refreshments and entrance fees according to the programme.

### What's not included?

Return air tickets from the UK to Thessaloniki. Personal expenses and extras.

### How to apply?

Email Kostas Doucas at [kgdoucas@otenet.gr](mailto:kgdoucas@otenet.gr), putting 'AGTO Fam April 21 application' in the subject line. Closing date is 15 October 2020.

FOR MORE INFORMATION GO THE MEMBER AREA OF THE AGTO WEBSITE - [www.agto.co.uk](http://www.agto.co.uk)

*"Dear friends. It is a great pleasure that I became a member of the AGTO family. Founded in 1885, Doucas Tours & Travel is the oldest travel company in Greece. Organising travel for groups is who we are. I would be very glad to welcome five of you to my region and show you the unknown Greece, a destination that has a great variety of special interest experiences to offer. I will be waiting to meet you at Thessaloniki airport in April to begin our six-day adventure."*  
Kostas G Doucas

# CJAM: working for YOU behind the scenes



Colchester-based CJAM Group has been AGTO's administrative partner since 2019. But what is CJAM, who are the team and what do they do?

CJAM is a specialist association management company that provides administrative, communications, financial management and events services for associations such as AGTO.

But what does that actually mean? Put simply, if you contact AGTO by phone (01787 221022) or send an email (agto@agto.co.uk) it's going to be CJAM that picks up the message.

Our account manager, and the day-to-day contact, is the bubbly Jade Valentine. If the face looks familiar, she was part of the team delivering the AGTO Showcase Weekend in Stratford-upon-Avon in February. Jade's sunny disposition and friendly approach have already established her as a welcoming point of contact for members.

Behind the scenes, CJAM is headed up by a senior team with expertise spanning all aspects of the membership sector. Managing director, Christine Joyce (the 'CJ' of CJAM, with 'AM' standing for 'Association Management'), launched the company nearly ten years ago in recognition of the growing need to support associations and provide outsourcing solutions. She is joined by Jason Simms, association director, who brings 20 years' experience in communications and strategic planning to head up the account management team and provide senior counsel to the 18 associations CJAM currently manages.

CJAM houses an experienced and astute financial team led by Laura Smith, finance and compliance manager working with

two finance assistants, Holly Daly and Zillah DiDuca.

CJAM also provides a full-service in-house marketing and web team, headed up by Emma Burley, marketing director, a digital marketing and content specialist, a trained journalist and data-driven strategist. She works with Janine Danha, content writer, Ben Joyce, marketing account manager and Lauren Shelley, marketing assistant to develop campaigns across online and offline platforms, events promotion and material and creative design, video and animation. She also works alongside Simon Knapp, digital director, to develop specialist membership websites, including AGTO's own recent new website. Simon and web developer Rich Barrett have developed innumerable bespoke websites for the membership and non-profit sector, and continue to work on updating and maintaining the AGTO website.

The CJAM team is committed to supporting and helping AGTO and its members. Whilst it's Jade who will be your normal point of contact, it's good to know that she has a team behind her to call upon as required. The delivery of our new website is testament to what the CJAM team can deliver. A number of other exciting projects, all aimed at ensuring AGTO maintains and develops its position as the UK's largest independent, professional membership organisation supporting and representing the interests of individuals who organise travel for groups, are in the pipeline.

For more information about CJAM, go to [www.cjam.co.uk/about/our-work](http://www.cjam.co.uk/about/our-work)



The CJAM team. From left to right: Jade Valentine, Emma Burley, Jason Simms, Laura Smith, Simon Knapp and Zillah DiDuca.



## ‘Staycation’ and a festive boost

**John Johnson, commercial director at Johnsons Coaches of Henley-in-Arden in Warwickshire, discusses how the group travel landscape might look over the next few months and into 2021.**

The landscape for group travel has never faced so many bumps in the road before! The biggest challenge ahead will be that of confidence and enjoyment. The introduction of Visit Britain’s ‘Good to Go’ status has helped us and many tour operators, hotels and attractions provide their customers with the reassurance they need to travel with confidence.

We have implemented ‘Safe Operating Procedures’ for group travel (see p3) and ‘Coach Capacity Guidelines’, based on our in-depth risk assessment, together with COVID-19 insurance cover and a flexible booking policy. I believe these measures will be key for all in our industry to provide groups with the confidence they need to travel in the near future and into 2021.

Jo Brown, groups tour manager for Johnsons Coaches, has been working in the group travel industry for over 30 years. After speaking to many of her group organisers it is clear that they are keen to do tours again next year and almost all have indeed transferred their cancelled tours to next year. So we are hoping for a good bounce-back year and there are plenty of enquiries coming in. It’s all about rebuilding confidence. My main aim is to reassure organisers that we are doing everything to ensure that their travel experience is as safe as possible, and as enjoyable as possible.

Talking again of customer confidence; in July, we launched our 2020/2021 holiday departure list to over 10,000 of our loyal customers. It received a fantastic response with almost 1,500 passengers booking within the first week. The rise of the ‘Staycation’ was definitely evident in terms of bookings with over 1,000 passengers booking for a UK tour. Surprisingly, our festive programme was also popular with many bookings for New Year breaks, no doubt due to lots of people wanting to see off this year and welcome 2021! Customers are looking for a change of scenery and having something to look forward to.

Continental touring will still be affected I think, right through next summer, what with the double whammy of Brexit and COVID-19! And here in the UK we are still meeting some resistance from

attractions and a few hotels with regard to groups. But with good planning and good processes in place we are well placed to overcome these difficulties and provide some great trips for our groups – and the earlier the better!

Our coach hire has also been slowly growing in recent months. Gary Harridence, our coach hire manager, has seen a rising tide of transfers to next year, with group travel organisers keen for us to book their coaches and hotels, and agree their itineraries. This again is a good indicator for 2021. On the other hand, there are the corporate clients who are slightly more anxious on the risk factor, coupled with schools and universities who all have the responsibility of many when it comes to group travel.

So while all bodes well for 2021, this autumn and winter will be more of a challenge. However, once we can reassure our clients and bolster their confidence, I believe we can still get some wheels rolling in this ‘quiet’ season.

It is clear to see that group travel will return next year, and holidays and excursions by coach will once again prove to be the number one choice of group travel organisers: for quality, variety, excellent value for money... and for great fun!



**Customers are looking for a change of scenery and having something to look forward to.**

# Carlie's Theatre Tips

Watching a theatrical performance online has become a popular pastime for many. Live theatre is also making a welcome comeback. Carlie Newman casts her critic's eye over the schedules.

Well, it looks as though we shall finally have a choice as theatres and venues start to offer outside performances. In London, the magnificent Regent's Park Open Air Theatre is presenting *Jesus Christ Superstar – The Concert* until the end of September. But it's not the only venue having outside performances. Check online to see what's on offer. Meanwhile, there's a wide choice of online productions to enjoy.

## *The Swan*

First, a truly astonishing piece of dance. It's less than five minutes in length, and it's free to watch. Birmingham Royal Ballet's new director Carlos Acosta has reworked 'The Dying Swan', originally choreographed by Mikhail Fokine for Anna Pavlova. BRB principal dancer Céline Gittens performs the piece from her living room. Camille Saint-Saëns' 'Le Cygne', from 'Le Carnaval des Animaux', is performed by pianist Jonathan Higgins and cellist Antonio Novais. "This is a dance of promises," says Acosta.

Visit [www.brb.org.uk/post/the-swan](http://www.brb.org.uk/post/the-swan)

## *15 Heroines*

Theseus, Hercules, Ulysses, Jason, Achilles... The island-hopping heroes of classical mythology leave a trail of women - queens, sorcerers, pioneers, poets and politicians - in their

swaggering wake. Two thousand years ago, the Roman poet Ovid gave voice to those women in a series of fictional letters called 'The Heroines'.

Now, 15 leading British playwrights draw inspiration from Ovid to dramatise the lives of *15 Heroines*. This exclusive online production in partnership with Digital Theatre is filmed live from the empty Jermyn Street Theatre in central London and presented from 9 to 14 November. Delivered by an outstanding cast in three parts - The War, The Desert and The Labyrinth - *15 Heroines* is a landmark theatrical event.

[www.jermynstreettheatre.co.uk/show/15-heroine](http://www.jermynstreettheatre.co.uk/show/15-heroine)

## *Locked Down. Locked In. But Living.*

This is a triple bill with world premieres from three superb dance companies, making it one of autumn's hottest online shows. Studio Wayne McGregor, Northern Ballet and Gary Clarke Company unveil pieces about isolation, choreographed by Jordan James Bridge, Daniel De Andrade and Gary Clarke respectively, and performed around the Lawrence Batley Theatre's Grade II listed building in Huddersfield. Available to watch from 28 September to 18 October. Tickets cost £12.

[www.thelbt.org/shows/locked-down-locked-in-but-living](http://www.thelbt.org/shows/locked-down-locked-in-but-living)

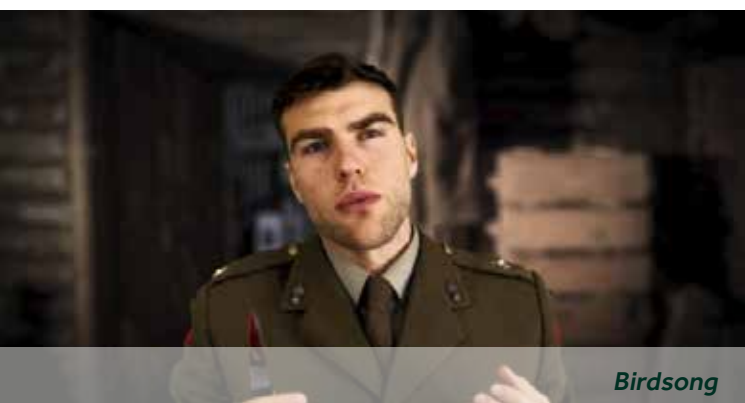
## *Funny Girl*

Showtunes don't get much more defiant or rousing than *Don't Rain on My Parade*. Sheridan Smith wards off the clouds with a gritty rendition as Fanny Bryce in this production of the classic musical at Manchester's Palace Theatre in 2017. It's one of the many productions available from DIGITAL THEATRE whose offerings also include *The Crucible* starring Richard Armitage at the Old Vic in London, and Maxine Peake's *Hamlet* at the Royal Exchange in Manchester. With Digital Theatre you can rent a single production or subscribe for full access. [www.digitaltheatre.com/consumer/production/funny-girl](http://www.digitaltheatre.com/consumer/production/funny-girl)

## Royal Shakespeare Company

You can watch a ground-breaking, effects-laden version of *The Tempest*, with Simon Russell Beale as Prospero, with a subscription (or 14-day free trial) to the online service Marquee TV.

*Antony and Cleopatra* with Josette Simon and *Richard II* with David Tennant are two of the other gems in the selection of Royal Shakespeare Company plays available. But there are also six RSC productions available to watch free on BBC iPlayer: *Hamlet* starring Paapa Essiedu, *Macbeth* with Christopher



*Birdsong*



Eccleston, *Much Ado About Nothing* with Edward Bennett and Michelle Terry, *Othello* with Hugh Quarshie and Lucian Msamati, *Romeo and Juliet* with Bally Gill and Karen Fishwick, and *The Merchant of Venice* with Makram J Khoury.

[www.marquee.tv](http://www.marquee.tv)

### Oscar Wilde season

While I'm mentioning Marquee TV, you can see *An Ideal Husband* as part of four productions in Classic Spring Theatre Company's starchy Oscar Wilde season in the West End.

Edward and Freddie Fox play father and son in *An Ideal Husband* Eve Best is a memorable Mrs Arbuthnot in *A Woman of No Importance*; Kathy Burke directs *Lady Windermere's Fan*; and Sophie Thompson is horrified by theatre's most famous handbag in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. They can all be watched on the online service Marquee TV, which is offering a 14-day free trial.

[www.marquee.tv](http://www.marquee.tv)

### Birdsong

Is *Birdsong* film or theatre? Well, it's actually a filmed version of a play! Set in the First World War, before, during and after the shattering Battle of the Somme, the story tells of the ordinary soldiers and their officers who fought a war that on the first day ended with 57,470 casualties, including 19,240 killed in action. For the number of casualties, it is considered to be the worst day in the history of the British Army.

This super production by The Original Theatre Company, which had a successful London run and an equally great touring success, has now been produced under lockdown conditions.

The actors, doing their own make-up and placing, filmed themselves against green screens, using Zoom. In post-production the editors put in filmed backgrounds and added digital sound and a lovely musical background designed and played by James Findlay. The author of the original 1993 novel, Sebastian Faulks, narrates and fills in the story in the break between the first and second halves.

The original stage performance that I saw was very moving and, in a very different way, this version is emotionally involving as well. There are moving performances from all the actors, bringing the sadness to life. It is difficult at the beginning to accept the Zoom view of just heads, sometimes stacked. But the close-ups of each face bring the tragedy right in front of the viewer and the actors soon manage to make you forget that they are all in separate rooms as they pass objects from one person to another.

No curtain call, but a field where poppies grow. It's well-directed by Alistair Whateley and Charlotte Peters with some lovely filmed images, and the music and songs enhance the action.

Having said all that, the online screening was originally available only in July, and the website links have disappeared for the moment. However, I understand that it may reappear soon, so do keep an eye out for it, and if you do catch it, try to watch it on the biggest screen you can!

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

### Theatre Cafe

Right now is a difficult time for everyone, so the folks at the Theatre Cafe have come up with a fantastic idea to support performers during this time. They will be live streaming paid-for concerts with some well-known West End faces such as Layton Williams, Lucie Jones and Aimie Atkinson. Tickets are just £7.50.

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

And for live theatrical experiences, the long-awaited *Hairspray* is due to open on 22 April 2021 at the London Coliseum.

Running until 29 August 2021 you can book your group in now!

I went to the press launch of this – seems ages ago now – and met the cast.

Paul Merton will be making his West End musical debut as Wilbur Turnblad. He will star alongside Michael Ball, who returns to his legendary, Olivier Award-winning role of Edna Turnblad. Lizzie Bea will star in the iconic role of Tracy Turnblad and Marisha Wallace will take the role of Motormouth. Rita Simons and Jonny Amies will also join the cast as Velma von Tussle and Link Larkin respectively.

The first indoor performance that I shall be attending will be *Sleepless, A Musical Romance*, a new musical based on the film, *Sleepless in Seattle*. It's currently running until the end of September at The Troubadour Theatre in Wembley Park, London. See my review on the AGTO website.

Keep an eye out where you live for live shows starting up again. After this period of closure they need your support.

Here's one that's great for younger viewers: *The Wind in the Willows the Musical*, which was filmed when it played at the London Palladium in 2017. This musical adaptation was put together by *Downton Abbey* creator Julian Fellowes, and places the characters of Ratty, Badger, Mole and Toad on the stage. The show can be enjoyed by simply visiting the website at [www.willowsmusical.com](http://www.willowsmusical.com).

Over on the Eugenius! Facebook page, viewers can watch a never-before-seen recording of the show recorded at London's The Other Palace theatre in 2017/18. The musical follows Eugene, a boy who wants to turn his comic book into a superhero film. I saw and enjoyed the original theatre version.

Finally, here's a link to 'The Showstoppers', a theatrical team whose affectionate homage to the delights and vagaries of the Eurovision Song Contest (and other work) is earning them plaudits. Check out this link. <https://bit.ly/3eJvyF9>

# TEST YOUR knowledge

How well do you know your destinations and visitor attractions? Can you identify the locations of the following photos. Some are certainly easier than others. You'll find the answers at the bottom of p50.







# Are you making the most OF YOUR **AGTO** membership?

Whether you're a GTO or an Associate member, AGTO membership offers a wide range of benefits. From fam trips, discounts and offers, to professional support, here's a summary of what they are.



## FOR GROUP TRAVEL ORGANISERS:

- Discounted entry and tickets for theatres, attractions, hotels, travel and more via our 'GTO Offers' page.
- Exclusive FAM trip invitations from our Associates on our 'GTO Offers' page
- Invitation to the annual AGTO Showcase Weekend and AGM
- FREE Supplier search facilities in the Members-only section of the AGTO website
- EXCLUSIVE discounted GTO insurance cover with Towergate Insurance
- EXCLUSIVE Organiser Liability Insurance
- FREE dedicated AGTO advice line
- FREE copy of the quarterly AGTO Magazine containing news, reviews and articles from GTOs, Associates, our Branches, and across the travel and tourism industry
- FREE listing in the annual AGTO Handbook
- VIP registration to many trade shows and events
- FREE membership of your local AGTO Branch
- FREE access to contact your fellow GTO members
- Use of the AGTO logo on your literature and website
- Networking opportunities with fellow GTOs, Associate members and other industry professionals at free or low-cost events
- FREE membership to English Heritage
- FREE membership to National Trust
- COMPLIMENTARY access to National Trust for Scotland properties
- COMPLIMENTARY copy of the National Garden Scheme Yellow Book
- Discounted product training
- Advice and discounted PR support
- Advice and discounted Social Media support.

**TO FIND OUT HOW TO ACCESS THESE BENEFITS, LOG IN TO THE MEMBER SECTION OF THE NEW AGTO WEBSITE.**

**[www.agto.co.uk](http://www.agto.co.uk)**

## FOR ASSOCIATE (SUPPLIER) MEMBERS:

- EXCLUSIVE access to the AGTO GTO member database – with full GDPR compliance
- Opportunities to present your business and products to GTOs at regional AGTO branch meetings
- Opportunities to host GTO familiarisation trips to showcase your products
- Invitation to the annual AGTO Showcase Weekend and AGM to mix with GTO members in both a commercial and social setting
- Opportunities to promote package or discounted entry/tickets for your business via our 'GTO Offers' page.
- Free editorial/advertising opportunities in the quarterly AGTO Magazine
- Free copy of the AGTO Magazine
- Free listing in the annual AGTO Handbook
- Free company listing with details and logo included in the Associate database on the AGTO website, with a link to your website
- Reduced costs for exhibiting in AGTO area at trade shows
- Representation services at networking events and trade shows
- Have your press releases shown on the AGTO website
- Free promotion via our social media feeds, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Twitter, YouTube
- Wide range of additional sponsorship opportunities
- Free access to AGTO Branches
- Free use of the AGTO logo for your literature, website and tradeshow
- Networking opportunities with GTOs, fellow Associate members and other industry professionals at free or low-cost events
- Discounted PR advice and writing services
- Discounted Social Media advice and services
- Discounted business planning, itinerary planning and marketing services for the groups market
- FREE job vacancy advertising via the AGTO website.

Date	Branch	Events	Contact
7th October	National	Group Leisure & Travel Awards, online, starting at 4.30pm	<a href="http://www.groupleisureandtravel.com/awards">www.groupleisureandtravel.com/awards</a>
9th-11th November	National	World Travel Market Virtual, online	<a href="http://www.london.wtm.co.uk">www.london.wtm.co.uk</a>
<b>2021</b>			
6-8th January	National	AGTO Showcase Cruise and AGM from Liverpool to Southampton listed	<a href="mailto:agto@agto.co.uk">agto@agto.co.uk</a> Watch out for an update!
23rd January	National	Excursions™ 2021 Alexandra Palace, London	<a href="http://www.excursionsshow.com">www.excursionsshow.com</a> Watch out for an update!
7th-10th February	Central	AGTO and fam weekend, Scarborough	Martin Gibson For contact information, go to the new AGTO website: <a href="http://www.agto.co.uk">www.agto.co.uk</a>
24th-25th March	National	British Tourism & Travel Show, NEC, Birmingham	<a href="http://www.tourismshow.co.uk">www.tourismshow.co.uk</a>
19th April	Western	AGM Shepton Mallet Prison	Martin Gibson For contact information, go to the new AGTO website: <a href="http://www.agto.co.uk">www.agto.co.uk</a>
19th - 24th April	National	Doucas Tours & Travel fam trip Central Macedonia	To apply, see details in this issue of the AGTO Magazine
21st April	National	Go Travel Show Kempton Park, Surrey	<a href="http://www.gotravelshow.com">www.gotravelshow.com</a>
7th October	National	Group Leisure & Travel Show Milton Keynes	<a href="http://www.grouptravelshow.com">www.grouptravelshow.com</a>
3rd - 7th December	Kent	Autumn Break, Daish's Holidays for Groups, Kendal	Jim Silvester For contact information, go to the new AGTO website: <a href="http://www.agto.co.uk">www.agto.co.uk</a>

**If you're planning an event and would like the details shown on this page, please email [editorial@agto.co.uk](mailto:editorial@agto.co.uk)**

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Answers to 'Test your knowledge': 1. RHS Garden Wisley, Surrey 2. Harry Potter Diagon Alley, Warner Bros. Studio Tour London, Hertfordshire; 3. St Mary and All Saints Church, Chesterfield; 4. Stalheim Hotel, Norway; 5. Polperro, Cornwall; 6. Sir Francis Drake, The Hoe, Plymouth; 7. Maiden with the Seagull, Opatija, Croatia; 8. Craig Goch Dam, Eilan Valley, Powys; 9. Three Daughters of Helios, Criterion Building, Piccadilly Circus, London; 10. Auxerre and the River Yonne, Burgundy, France; 11. Birmingham Christmas Market; 12. Dinan, Brittany; 13. Royal Pavilion, Brighton; 14. St Brelade's Bay, Jersey; 15. Men by the Sea, Esbjerg, Denmark.

# ALL THAT GLITTERS MAY NOT BE GOLD!

**THE UNEXPECTED DEMISE OF Specialist Leisure Group, and with it, Shearings, National Holidays and Caledonian Travel, provided a stark reminder that even large and well-known companies can fail.**

**AGTO chief executive Wendy Hartley-Scarff offers a timely reminder of the importance of ensuring you have financial protection.**

There's little doubt that the online quizzes many of us have been doing during lockdown have boosted our general knowledge. Here's another question. Who was it who first coined the phrase: 'All that glitters is not gold'?

The answer appears to be William Shakespeare, who, in his play *The Merchant of Venice*, wanted to show that shiny things aren't necessarily precious. Here's the part of the verse:

*O hell! What have we here?  
A carrion Death, within whose empty eye  
There is a written scroll! I'll read the writing.*

*All that glitters is not gold: ...*

So far as we know, Shakespeare wasn't a GTO, although *The Merry Wives of Windsor* could well be referring to

a particularly boisterous group based in the Berkshire town. But whether he was or not, the warning is as relevant today as it was then.

But why am I mentioning this? Well, here's another question for you. You've booked a holiday or short break with a tour operator. What happens should the operator go into Administration? Is your money and your group's money protected? Will you get it back?

Reputable tour operators and travel companies will have something about 'peace of mind' and 'your financial protection' on their websites. They will explain who they are bonded

with. It might be ABTA, or perhaps the BCH scheme, the bonded coach holidays scheme administered by the Confederation of Passenger Transport UK, the coach and bus industry's trade organisation.

When you see all this you can relax with a welcome cuppa, knowing that your money, and that of your members is protected. Or maybe not!

And this is where Mr Shakespeare reappears. This is where the dangers can arise. All that glitters is not gold, or to bring the phrase up to date, all that glitters may not be gold.

Not every tour operator who says it has bonding in place is telling the truth. As more and more GTOs start to take note of the importance of protecting their

monies we hear of tour operators whose glitzy claims aren't quite as real as they should be.

So, to ensure you're not caught out, check that your tour operator has bonding (or a trust fund) in place. Find out who it's with, and then go to that company's website to double check that the operator is indeed telling

the truth. Let's be clear, probably 95% are behaving properly. But you really don't want to discover you've given money to one of the 5%.

Do your research, give yourself the reassurances you need, and you'll surely find that, to quote the Bard one final time, all's well that ends well.



**Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* could well be referring to a particularly boisterous group based in the Berkshire town.**

# VISIT OUR WEBSITE

## NEW FOR 2020 IS THE REDESIGNED AGTO WEBSITE.

Our new site has a much cleaner more modern appearance, is easier to navigate and more intuitive, giving you the speed you need when searching for information.

### SECURITY

Most of the website is password protected, designed to protect your data. Only AGTO members can access your data and the exclusive offers available to our members.

### NEWS

Up-to-the-minute industry news plus the AGTO magazines and the press releases from AGTO members.

### BRANCH NETWORK

Details of local contacts and activities in your area.

### MEMBER SEARCH

Find the Associate you are looking for easily. Access the websites for full details of their product offering.

### GTO OFFERS

Details of exclusive fam trips plus special annual offers and last minute deals.

### INSURANCE/LEGAL

Information about organisers liability insurance and AGTO's exclusive rates. Keep up-to-date with current legislation for group travel.

### FUTURE PLANS

The AGTO website has been designed to allow future expansion to include membership renewals online, payment online, educational content and much more...



## [www.agto.co.uk](http://www.agto.co.uk)

### The AGTO website can keep you connected and informed

The age of advanced technology and instant communication has presented businesses and associations with a range of challenges. One such challenge has been how to keep customers and members connected and informed.

One method that AGTO has found effective in helping members with questions and requirements is through digital media channels, including our website and social media feeds.

AGTO's website - [www.agto.co.uk](http://www.agto.co.uk) - is a central hub for Associate Members and GTOs alike. It has information about the Association, useful links and contact details, special offers and industry news.

The Association's Twitter and Facebook feeds also keep members updated, as well as providing useful links and information to GTOs and Associate Members.

### CONNECT WITH US

[facebook.com/AssociationofGroupTravelOrganisers](https://facebook.com/AssociationofGroupTravelOrganisers)

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