

BLOG PART 6 AND FINAL

Michael and Norma's camper travels in Europe 2014

SWEDEN, DENMARK AND BACK TO ENGLAND

We really hadn't intended to spend a long time in Sweden, taking in the southern part only, but the country did turn out to be a most interesting and attractive place to tour.



We took the ferry from the Aland islands of Finland to the very tiny port of Grisslehamn, a trip of about two hours. We headed towards Stockholm but took a deviation to the university town of Uppsala. The main sight to see there is the huge red-brick cathedral, the largest church in Scandinavia, with twin towers plus another at the crossing towering over the town. The interior is pleasant rather than dramatic, the naves as tall as would be expected. For a period this summer they are using part of the central interior for an exhibition of ancient religious artefacts and art, complemented by some modern art as an interesting juxtaposition.

In a substantial sarcophagus lie the bodies of King Gustav Vasa, his wife and his son. Gustav Eriksson, as he was then, was a survivor of the Stockholm Bloodbath in 1620, the culmination of the Danish crusade against Sweden. He organised an army to oust Denmark's King Christian from Sweden and in 1623 was named king. He found the country in economic and social turmoil, took over church property and started the nation's conversion to Lutheranism, and implemented substantial economic reforms. He and the dynasty he established oversaw the building of Sweden into one of Europe's great powers. They also got involved in wars with Denmark, Lubeck and Poland.



Then down to Stockholm, where we headed for a well-documented parking strip along the Strandvagan, which runs along the waterfront of the city. It's a fantastic place to stay in a city, but busy and noisy. The next day we got going early to be first at the door of the Vasa Museum, a short walk away over a bridge to the island that lies opposite us, Djurgarden.

A mighty ship, to become known as the Vasa, was built on the orders of King Gustav II Adolph, The grandson of Gustav Vasa. The ship was intended for a major role in the Swedish Navy, and was the most expensive and richly ornamented naval vessel ever to have been built in Sweden. She was required by the Swedish Navy not only to bolster prestige but also to add naval power to the country's planned involvement in the 30 Years War (basically between Protestant and Catholic nations), which was raging in Europe at the time.

She was made ready for a short maiden voyage in August 1628 after three years in construction in a vast dockyard on Blasieholmen, one of the islands in Stockholm's inner harbour (we can see the island from the van). She was built of a thousand oaks, carried 64 large guns including 48 24-pounders, and was square rigged on three masts. Her length including bowsprit was 69 metres, and she displaced about 1,210 tons.



We know from the fact that there were women and children aboard and no soldiers that this must have been planned as no more than a trial jaunt out into the archipelago. She was kedged away from the wharf in front of the Royal Palace, where she was lying, and set sails in light winds. After about 1,000 metres, heading east, she caught stronger winds from the south as she cleared a bigger island, and listed to port; and then listed more and more until the lower gun ports began to take water. The end was then inevitable, as the listing worsened until the lower decks were flooded and she began to sink.

The reasons for the Loss of the Vasa have long been investigated. The king was away in Prussia, from where he concluded that “imprudence and negligence” must have been the cause and that the guilty parties must be punished. The Council of the Realm commenced an inquiry, but no guilty parties were established. The ships were built to the normal specifications for large sailing warships of the time, she was not overloaded, nothing – such as the cannons – were insecure and could have moved. The specifications had been approved by the king himself, and the Council was never able to establish who might have been a guilty party.

However, all tall ships of the time carrying heavy guns were fundamentally unstable and needed careful handling, including securing gun ports under certain conditions. In the case of the Vasa the boundaries had been pushed too far: too high, too many guns, too little ballast (a tiny amount, on the basis of cross-sectional drawings). Crew had been made to run back and forth across the decks and were able to make the ship rock, demonstrating her tenderness. This had been observed by a watching admiral, who dismissed this sign of vulnerability.



Modern calculations have shown that the weight of the guns – and even the ballast – was not as important a factor as the sheer mass of the topsides and castle. Her oak beams and other structural members were of tremendous size and of such a weight that the ship would always be immensely tender, to use a yachting word, and that strenuous efforts would have to be made to close ports that could admit water when she heeled – which she could do too easily.

Ships were not at the time designed and built on theoretical principles, but on common sense and experience. At the extremes, neither basis is sound, and “bold innovations” can fail, as this one did.

The wreck was discovered in 1956 by an expert in 16th and 17th century naval warfare, and recovered in an extraordinary feat of salvage, although the basic technique was conventional. Following her recovery in 1961 the Vasa was kept moist and preserved by spraying with a mix of water and polyethylene glycol, which displaced water from the sodden timbers. The ship as she sits in the museum built for her is 95% original, an astonishing feat of reconstruction after 333 years on the harbour bed.

Walking through the doors into the mighty hall where the Vasa now sits in her cradles is a literally awe-inspiring experience. The bow, with beak-head and bowsprit tower overhead, the mass of the ship with her wide tumblehome are overwhelming. Then your eye is taken by the detail, particularly

the hundreds of wooden sculptures along every feature of the vessel at every level. They include warriors, angels, devils, musicians, emperors and gods – 500 figures and 200 other sculptures.



The Vasa can be walked around at six levels, allowing a detailed inspection of her features and decorative sculptures. Her longboat lies on a stand alongside at what would have been water level, giving a vivid idea of the shallowness of her draft relative to her high massive hull, plus masts and rigging. At each level there are interesting displays explaining the original construction of the vessel, aspects of a seaman's life aboard, naval warfare in the age of sail, and the preservation of all the ship's contents, which included food stores, seamen's chests and other personal possessions. .

Among the displays are the skeletal remains of 10 of the 30 or so who perished in the sinking, mostly men but also a few women, family members who were allowed on this maiden voyage.

In the afternoon we decided to take a run round of the harbour, and took one of the regular tour boats for a couple of hours on the water. The harbour in Stockholm is an exceedingly complicated system of islands and channels which continues out to sea for over 50 kilometres as the Stockholm Archipelago. This allows for countless marinas, bays, commercial wharves and waterfront developments, all of which we were able to see.



We were struck by two important aspects of life in Stockholm. The first is the extent to which apartments are where the majority live, with vast apartment complexes all around the outer parts of the harbour – some old, and many very new, being built on disused industrial land as is the case in many such cities.



The other is the number and variety of small vessels, quite apart from the cruise boats and commercial ships. We have visited many of the great port cities of the world, and have never seen anything like Stockholm. We already had a taste of

this where we were parked, as just across the waterfront walkway from us are a great collection of oldish and traditional vessels.

The next day we set off for a walk around the old town. It is not so cutesy-medieval as some such centres in northern Europe, but it is very genuine and mostly untouched from the original because

nobody bombed it flat at any time. It has been lived and worked in for hundreds of years without any cataclysmic events that required its rebuilding.



The

nearest event to a cataclysm is I suppose the invasion of armies of tourists, but in the old town they tend to stick to the pedestrian-only streets lined with souvenir shops and expensive café-restaurants. We found lots of quiet little streets and lanes only a few metres away, and at one of these – Magnus Ladulas – we had an excellent lunch at a European-average price, sitting outside the heritage building enjoying the sun.

The massively bulky, square-off, rather dull-looking royal palace overlooks it all. Without making any effort to do so we caught the very end of the little display put on by the royal guards in their quaint blue uniforms on smart brown horses, to the sound of a brass band.



After lunch we visited another museum, the home of the Royal Academy but the temporary home for a selection of highlights from the National Museum, currently closed for renovation. As for the Lens-Louvre, this was a chance for the main museum not only to show off some of its most popular exhibits but also those rarely or never seen by the public. So, this was an impressive display of art, mostly paintings but also some ceramics and small sculptures, and easily consumed by the foot-weary tourist in a happy hour or two.



The next day we took the usual rather stressful drive out of a big city, and in the suburbs took a look at the Drottningholm Palace, which is still the place the Swedish King Carl XVI Gustav and Queen Silvia spend part of their time. It was designed in Renaissance style by Nicodemus Tessin. Building was begun in 1662, on the remains of the original palace, which was devastated by fire, and was thus a contemporary of the Palace of Versailles. Its history is much bound up

with the various queens over the centuries, and “drottning” means “queen”.

It is a severely symmetrical building in buff colouration, certainly not as dramatic or ornate as Versailles but it was built to demonstrate Swedish power rather than glory. It looks suitably grand, especially when viewed over the water in front of it.



Crossing to the west over southern Sweden we visited the town of Orebro, where the thing to see is the castle, which sits most attractively in the centre of the crossroads town, perched on an island with the river flowing around it, forming a moat. The precinct includes a pleasantly green park, with plenty of places for people to sit and look at the castle. The fortress first appears in written records in 1364, and is now (after some over-enthusiastic late 19th century “renovations”, which were intended to make it look grander) the classic shape with a rectangular keep with a prominent

tower at each corner. The region was under Danish control until Gustav Vasa’s war of independence in the early 16th century, whereupon the castle became an interest of a succession of Swedish kings.

We had a walk through the courtyard of the keep and up into one of the towers, which was as far as we could go without taking a later guided tour that describes the history of the place. The interior is now a centre of local government.

In the evening, tracking down some music coming from the town, we walked into the pedestrianized centre and found a most pleasant scene: the town’s major church overlooking the length of a wide cobbled street with cafes and restaurants under canvas all the way down the middle and all heavily patronised. The Gothic university building stood to one side, and each way on a cross street we could see a similar picture but with a lot fewer people. Overall, it turns out, Orebro is a very pleasant town and looks like a good place to live.



Then away the following day, again cross-country, mostly on motorways and major roads, through generally flat countryside, farmlands with dark red buildings sometimes highlighted by bright golden wheat fields. Many of these were being harvested as we passed (we were to find out tomorrow that there was a degree of urgency in this, as the farmers probably knew what the forecast was!).

We made a stop at the small town of Mariestad, a lovely little place with a small harbour on the SE shore of the enormous inland Lake Vanern. There was a large harbourside parking place for motorhomes, and many were there, but it was too early to stop and stay, so we just had a walk around and a look at the large, tall late Gothic church. This was originally built as a cathedral, with

the local people founding a new diocese in a deliberate move in opposition to the Reformation – not that this lasted very long in the face of enthusiastic Lutheranism.



The stop for the night was in a large tree-lined field which turned out to be part of what had been a vast English-style formal park and garden, associated with the castle of Graftnas on the shore of Lake Anten (“Swan Lake”). The castle was originally built as a fortress in the 16th century but was later expanded into a French Renaissance-style palace. Practically nothing of this remains now, but the ruins have been partly restored. The precinct includes a sandy beach,

children’s playground and some nice little walks through the woodland, so it was a popular place for weekend visitors (probably mainly from Goteborg) on this hot summer Sunday.

Some small houses were being erected, and others renovated. A young man who was working on the site told us he was a volunteer and that the gardeners and builders were jobless folk who were being trained to become accustomed to getting up in the morning and doing something useful. To the side of the park was rest/holiday accommodation for Syrian and African refugees who were enjoying a break. They had been accepted by Sweden but were temporarily in reception centres pending a permanent home. We felt no threat. Sweden has a good reputation for accepting legal refugees, extending back to WW2 years when they saved the lives of thousands of Jews by taking them in. Unlike Britain, among others.

Then the weather changed, with heavy rain overnight and into the next day. It turned out that southern Sweden had caught the late effects of what was North Atlantic hurricane Bertha, which caused some havoc in northern England and Scotland before changing the weather for us, too, over the previous few days.



Following some clearing we travelled on to the west coast of southern Sweden, where we crossed a bridge over to the island of Kungälv and the town of Marstrand. We took (by foot) a little ferry for the short trip over the harbour to the island of Carlsten, and walked up to Carlsten fortress, sitting impressively on top of the hill at the island centre.

The peace treaty of Roskilde in 1658, when Sweden was at the height of its international power, established this area – on the coast and not far south of what is now the Norwegian border – as part of Sweden. Marstrand’s harbour is ice free, and became an important trading port. King Carl (Charles) X Gustav built this defensive redoubt, which had developed into a full-fledged castle by 1676 and known as Carlsten fortress. In 1677 the castle was taken by Danish forces, and several battles, sieges and brought many changes to the building over the next two centuries. It was also

used as a fearful prison. It was only in 1993 that Carlsten Fortress was finally declared not to be one of Sweden's defence installations.



Much of it has been rebuilt and there have been so many changes over the years that the fortress is a hard place to find your way around. It is hugely impressive and rather forbidding, with its round towers at the corners of the keep overwhelming its interior spaces. There are lots of vaults and "secret" tunnels and mysterious stairs, all a bit awe-inspiring. But from its terraces, where

once upon a time rows of cannons stood, there is a lovely view of the harbour and its many channels and islets.

Back on to the mainland – if there is such a thing in Sweden – and to the small town of Kungälv and yet another castle, Bohus Fortress, Bohus being the name of the region and Bohusian the coast. Castles are generally at the top of hills, so up we climbed again to a fortress that is a great contrast with the last one: this one, mostly now in ruins. The construction of Bohus began in 1308 by the then king of Norway, Haakon Magnusson, to defend the southern border of his country. It was regarded

as one of the strongest forts in the Nordic region, and despite 14 sieges was never captured. For 350 years it was either Norwegian or Danish, and became Swedish peacefully with the 1658 Treaty of Roskilde. Since then it gone through several incarnations, from simple castle to fortress to royal palace to prison. In 1786 the military left, and the castle fell to ruins, with the walls left to the local people to build their own homes. Extensive stabilisation and restoration started in the late 19th century, and the property is now managed by the influential Swedish National Property Board.



It's a wonderful place to wander around, with views appropriate to a fortress across the Gota river valley below, which now carries part of the Gota Canal. This connects waterways allowing waterborne travel from the west near Goteborg to the Baltic at Stockholm.

Then away south along the coast, keeping off the motorway as far as possible, and bypassing Goteberg (Gothenberg). We poked in and out of a few little fishing harbours on the way down the coast. Most are very quiet these days, as the prosperity they once enjoyed through herring fishing has died away with the industry. It's a flat and undramatic coast, with views over marshland to lakes and inlets, very popular with birds and birdwatchers.

We did make a fascinating stop in the minute settlement of Ugglarp. Many years ago an enthusiast started collecting old cars and aircraft, and the collection has now been brought together as the

Svedinos Bil & Flyg Museum. Svedinos, as we were to find out, was the first Swedish manufacturer of aircraft.



Like most such collections, it is an eclectic mix. Among the cars, there is a heavy emphasis on American cars of the 50s and 60s, and – not surprisingly – on Volvos. There are a few standouts: a lovely 1912 Puch with a timber-framed body; an incredible 1951 “Futurecar”, shaped like an aircraft body and that looked as though, with wings, it could fly and which as far as I could tell from the Swedish description was a Swedish experiment; and a weird 1968 Volkswagen “Zetos”, a plastic-bodied two-seater that I had heard of but never seen.

The aircraft collection was absorbing, squashed into two buildings that must have been constructed around them. The first building held small aircraft, including a very nice 1932 Focke-Wulf FW 44J “Stieglitz” biplane with a rotary engine and in Swedish military configuration. In the larger hall was the standout plane of the collection, a 1932 Junkers JU52/3M trimotor, the one with corrugated aluminium bodywork used as a German army and air force transport workhorse by everyone from Hitler and his cohorts down. This one is beautifully restored in German colours, swastikas and all.

Saab aircraft are well represented, as to be expected. This museum is not on the tourist trail but is very much worth a visit by anyone with an interest in old cars and planes.



Further down the coast, in the city of Halmstad, an event being heavily promoted was “Titanic: The Exhibition”, which is travelling the world. The exhibits range though a series of small halls and are heavily based on contemporary photographs. There is much history of the (in parts, faulty) design and building of the ship, and discussion of the lamentable lack of lifeboats. There is a contemporary recording of a telling interview with an executive of the White Star Line pointing out that lifeboats were not really necessary

for a ship that was designed to be unsinkable. We are not Titanic buffs, so much of the information was new to us and the show was well done.

DENMARK-GERMANY-NETHERLANDS-FRANCE

The ferry to Denmark leaves from Helsingborg, and we arrived there with immaculate timing (unusual!) just in time to pay at the kiosk and go straight on to the moderate-sized ferry – expensive for a short trip at about €45. This is about the same



cost as the toll for crossing the enormous bridge from Malmo over to Denmark.

So there we were in Denmark, and without intending stopping for exploration of Helsingore, snapped "Hamlet's castle", Elsinore, from the ferry on the approach.

Down through Denmark, we bypassed Copenhagen, went through industrial Roskilde, and continued south that appeared to us a lot like England, with gently rolling countryside, small fields and lots of hedges, and solid-looking houses. This was through the large island of Zealand, and on the way we crossed a very long but rather rickety-looking and bumpy bridge (as opposed to the newer, posher bridge for the motorway) from one island to another, on the southern side of which is the ferry port of Rodbyhavn.

We crossed from there to Germany's port of Puttgarden, on a gloomy morning. To our surprise, as we moved off we were joined by a train, on rails that ran through the port side of the ship and obviously joined up with those on land each end. This has never happened to us before! Now I realised why there was a railway station right by the car park where we had just spent the night.



Our main aim was to get through this corner of Germany on a day that there were no – or very few – trucks on the autobahns, so we pressed on down the main system past Hamburg and Bremen in heavy rain and wind. Just into the Netherlands, we visited Fort Bourtange, very close to the border. This is was initially built during the Eighty Years' War (circa 1568–1648) when William I of Orange wanted to control the only road between Germany and the city of

Groningen, which was controlled by the Spanish. He ordered that a fortress with five bastions be built in the swampland. The village was built within it. In 1851 the star fort was given up and Bourtange became a normal village. Around 1960 living conditions in the village deteriorated and it was decided that Bourtange would be rebuilt to its state of 1740-1750. Today it is an open-air museum.



We walked in over the waterways surrounding the fortifications into the village. People live there still, but obviously their orientation these days is towards tourism rather than defence. It was hard to make some sense of the history from the explanatory signage, because it was all in incomprehensible Dutch. Still, the earthworks were extraordinarily impressive, and lots of local people were making the most of the little cafes and restaurants that now surround the central square of the rebuilt little village in the centre of it all.

Then on down through the centre of the Netherlands, flat with lots of wheat fields and animal stock, roads straight as they followed the little canals between the polders. Since the late 16th century, large areas (the polders) have been reclaimed from the sea and from lakes, amounting to nearly 17% of the country's current land mass. The Netherlands' name literally means "low country", with only about 50% of its land exceeding one metre above sea level. Most of the areas below sea level are man-made.

With a population density of 406 people per km² – 497 if water is excluded – the Netherlands is a very densely populated country for its size. Only Bangladesh, South Korea and Taiwan have both a larger population and a higher population density. Amazingly nevertheless, the Netherlands is the world's second largest exporter of food and agricultural products, after the United States. The Netherlands was one of the first countries in the world to have an elected parliament, and since 1848 it has been governed as a parliamentary democracy and a constitutional monarchy. It is generally regarded as having a liberal view of the world and its laws, and polls show it as one of the happiest people in the world. We have always regarded the people as dour and abrupt, but these days they seem much more open and cheerful, and we had some great welcomes at camper stops.



We stopped for a couple of nights at the town of Hasselt, at a very welcoming marina. The marina features boatsheds that will take quite large vessels and are enclosed by doors. The unusual feature, for us, was that over these “boat sheds” are posh apartments, so that the owners are living above their boats., and we had a noisy thunderstorm with hail in the afternoon. In the morning, between showers we had a walk round the little town (officially a city) of Hasselt. This is a really pleasant place. It was once an

important Hanseatic town, and it has a typically grand 15th century town hall, with a well restored council chamber and a small display of weapons. It sits within a bend of the Zwartewater river, which leads directly to the sea via the IJsselmeer and made it important for trade and security. The latter was secured by a system of canals built from river to river round the back of the town, with the zig-zag configuration that is so typical of these defences in the Hanseatic cities. Lots of the waterways are crossed by classic Dutch lifting bridges, making them even more picturesque.

The weather continued wet, windy and cool. It was reported that yesterday was the coldest August day in the Netherlands for 90 years!

Then back to the freeways over the rest of the Netherlands and finally to Calais, where we booked a ferry over for the next day. We had to do this at the ferry terminal building, and on the way round we saw the large groups of young African men who are causing a fair bit of heart-ache these days by jumping on to or underneath heavy goods vehicles or even private trailers and motorhomes. We have no idea how they subsist – some camps have been recently bulldozed by the French authorities, and it seems that they must be living rough in the dunes and scrub, which extent widely round the Calais area. They look surprisingly fit and healthy, and a story in the Times indicated that the authorities had lost control of the situation.

ENGLAND

So back over to England and up to near Hereford, where we arrived at my sister Katie's place mid-afternoon on 23 August. This was the day before her birthday, when we were joined by a family gathering for a big lunchtime party, where a good time was had by all.

We stayed with Katie for the rest of the week, during which we visited Ludlow, a splendid little town with lots of Georgian and Tudor half-timbered buildings. In the centre there was a busy market, with most of the stalls selling local arts and crafts rather than food.



The town was originally built round its 11th century castle, built around 1086-90 by Roger de Lacy in attempt to control the Welsh, and turned into a palace by Roger Mortimer in the 14th century. It was an engaging and impressive ruin to amble around, reconstructing in our minds what the rooms would have looked like in its palatial era. The second visit of the day was to another very attractive

ruin, nearby Stokesay Castle. This is an extremely picturesque 13th century fortified manor house. A double tower stands at the end of the main dwelling, and the centrepiece is a magnificent great hall, with an impressively wide, wooded, arched roof structure.



Leaving Katie with regret, we then took the opportunity to spend a little while exploring in the van parts of central England that were unfamiliar to us or last seen long ago. We first drove to an excellent camp site in the Malvern Hills, near Worcester.

There has been a cathedral in Worcester since 680, built by St Oswald and dedicated to St Peter. He started a new cathedral in 983 and established a monastery attached to it. Saint Wulfstan began building the present cathedral in 1084, replacing its predecessors. Its atmospheric Norman crypt, with its low vaulted ceiling, dates back to those Norman times.

The church became one of the most important monastic cathedrals in the country during Anglo-Saxon times. Its role as a centre of learning continued into the later middle ages, with the Benedictine monks becoming qualified in many arts and sciences. It did suffer a tower collapse in 1175 and a fire in 1203 before the present structure was brought together by the end of the 13th century. In 1540 the monastery was dissolved under the edict of Henry VIII, and then in the Civil War – for



which the city remained staunchly Royalist – it was badly damaged again. Following the Restoration rehabilitation efforts began, but it was the Victorians from 1854 who did the bulk of the work on the structure that can be seen today.



Both the exterior, as it stands in command over the river, and the equally ornate interior of this building, are marvellous to walk around on this bright and sunny day. Tombs in chantries and engraved tablets in the floor abound. Probably the most famous is that of King John (1167-1216), the youngest son of Henry II. He became king following the death of his older brother and his murder of his nephew Arthur, but he was excommunicated by the pope in 1213 and his tyranny led to the nation's barons forcing him to sign the Magna Carta in 1215. Within an exquisitely carved

chantry chapel lies Prince Arthur, the oldest son of Henry VII. At 15 he was married to Catharine of Aragon but died in 1502 five months later. Whether that marriage was ever consummated became the centre of debate when his brother Henry VIII wanted to divorce the same Catharine and marry Anne Boleyn.

While driving towards Worcester we had seen many vintage and veteran cars on the road, and it was obvious that there was some kind of event for them. We looked out for it on the way back, and came across a VSCC driving test event in the grounds of a stately home. There was an astonishing variety of cars there, competing and otherwise, mostly pre-war or PVT as would be expected from the VSCC.



Then the next day to Tewkesbury Abbey, another historic and very interesting church. There has been a church on the site for over 1,200 years, and the present building has stood for nearly 900 years. Formally the church for a Benedictine abbey, it was consecrated in 1121. It survived the dissolution of 1540 because the people of the town bought it from Henry VIII for £453. It is an exceptionally large parish

church, as big as a cathedral, and was built from stone shipped from Normandy. Some typically solid Norman pillars line the nave, and the stained glass above the choir is 14th century. There are some lovely carved details in the bosses at the peak of each set of vaults, an ornate font, and a beautiful



red decorative feature in the vault over the high altar, supposedly in recognition of the House of Lancaster. Plenty of tombs as well, of course, including one called the Wakeman Cenotaph. This is supposed to be in memory of John Wakeman, the last abbot (buried elsewhere), and features a weird effigy of a near-skeletal decaying cadaver with rats crawling over a light loincloth. A descriptive plaque suggests that the tomb well predates his death and has nothing to do with him.

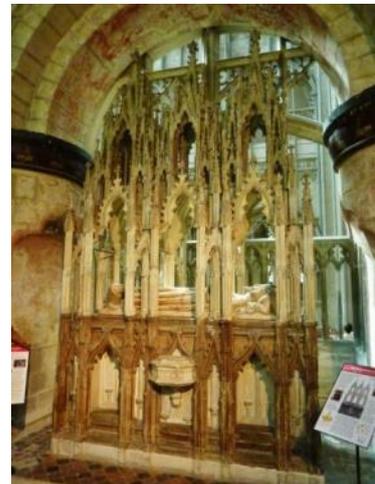
Tewkesbury town is a pleasant little place, with lots of timber framing. It sits on the confluence of the rivers Avon and Severn, which curl around it and feature lots of canal boats.



Getting to Gloucester, we walked across the grounds of an old priory to Gloucester Cathedral, another wonderful, large Gothic church on a Norman base with truly gigantic pillars, one of the earliest examples of the English perpendicular style (we read!). Originally built as part of an abbey (which was dissolved in 1541), its foundation was laid in 1089. King Henry III was crowned here in 1216.

King Edward II was a generally popular but weak man who was murdered in 1327 at Berkeley Castle shortly after abdicating under pressure from the nobility. The manner of his death is supposedly being impaled on a red-hot poker. However, he was buried with great ceremony by the high altar in Gloucester Cathedral, and a little later a magnificent tomb with a carved canopy in two decks was placed over this place. The king is depicted as a saintly figure,

carved in alabaster. For long after its construction this important monument was a focus for pilgrims and travellers, and the money they brought helped to finance a major rebuilding project in 1331. This work included the glowing 1349 eastern window, which celebrated local participation in the battle of Crecy and is the largest in England; and the pioneering fan vaulting in the cloisters, which was to be a pattern for churches all over the country.



Another part of Gloucester of interest that we walked around is the docks precinct, currently undergoing the kind of regeneration and rejuvenation as office buildings, shops, apartments and museums that we see in so many such facilities around the world. Gloucester connects with the River Severn just up from the main estuary, and quays were recorded there in 1390. International trade started in the late 16th century, and 15 huge warehouses were built for the 19th century corn trade.



In the Cotswolds, it was a misty morning as we walked into and through Broadway village. This is one of the best known Cotswold villages, with the pretty pubs, shops and houses strung out along the wide main street. I remembered much of it from a very long time ago, including the shop that sells tartan cloth and other Scottish apparel, where my Scottish mother and her older sister used to shop so long ago.

We the sun cutting through the mist we went on to meander through several other villages built of the softly glowing

golden Cotswold stone. Through most lovely countryside and the multitude of villages we approached the city of Warwick, and a visit to the castle. This is a simply magnificent place, with a history covering its time as a medieval fortress as well as, later, one of England's stateliest homes.



Way back in 1068 the Normans built a motte and bailey (a keep set on a mound surrounded by a wall) on a small hill, and the ruins of this little castle still stand on the rise within the greater castle's outer walls. The present castle was built in 1268 by the Beauchamp family, Earls of Warwick, and gradually extended into the 15th century. Richard Neville, the 16th Earl of Warwick, played a major part in the Wars of the Roses between the houses of York and Lancaster. This was a

major dispute on the royal succession, between the new Henry VI (Lancaster) and Richard, Duke of York. Richard was killed, but his son became king as Edward IV through the influence of Richard Neville, "Warwick the Kingmaker". But the two then fell out, and Neville schemed to bring Henry VI back to the throne. He exiled Edward, but Edward returned and defeated and killed the devious Earl a year later. At one time Neville had Henry VI locked in the Tower while he held Edward IV prisoner at Warwick!

By favour of the king the castle passed in 1604 into the Greville family, who in the 17th and 18th centuries transformed it into a great country mansion. Rather surprisingly the family supported the Parliament in the Civil War, and Royalists were imprisoned in the castle in 1642. Oliver Cromwell dined in the Great Hall in 1645, a waxwork stands in an adjacent room, and a cast of his death mask hangs on the wall.

In 1978 the castle was controversially sold to Madam Tussauds. All the history is now played up in displays throughout the castle's rooms, with the Tussaud influence well demonstrated in the tableaux of a frozen moment in time during a royal weekend visit in 1898, with figures – many recognisable, including a young Churchill and the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII – and taped conversations in the private apartments giving an eerily real impression that you are walking into a private meeting of friends and relations. This could have been a kind of Disney world, but it was nothing of the sort, and we were very impressed with the way that history, on a grand scale as well as minor, was being presented.

The state rooms, including the grand hall and dining rooms, are beautifully decorated and furnished



as they were in the mid-1800s, and of course the “Warwick the Kingmaker” story is played out in a series of rooms with yet more tableaux showing scenes typical of medieval life, the work of artisans and personal preparations for combat. Brilliant stuff.



Down in the town we visited the lovely Collegiate Church of St Mary, which was originally built in 1123 and rebuilt in many styles over the succeeding ages. Its main feature is the beautiful Beauchamp Chapel, where the gilded effigy of the fierce-looking Richard Beauchamp, 13th Earl of Warwick, rests on his tomb. The base of the tomb features “weepers”, including Richard Neville. Other tombs were for members of the Dudley family, of both Warwick and Leicester, whom we would come across again very soon.

We were soon to visit yet another historic castle, one of many during this part of the trip. This was Kenilworth Castle, with its long history of association with kings and queens of England since the construction of its massive keep by Henry I in the 1120s. It became a royal castle during the reigns of Henry II and King John, who enlarged and strengthened its defences in the early 12th century. John flooded the lowlands around the castle to create a surrounding mere. The castle was therefore able to withstand an epic six-month siege in 1266, when rebellious barons who had been supporters of Simon de Montfort held out against Henry III and his siege engines until starvation led to surrender.

During the late 14th century John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, rebuilt the inner court and staterooms, starting the castle’s transformation into a favourite palace for Lancastrian and Tudor kings. Some say that Henry V was in the Great Hall when he was handed the gift of tennis balls from the French King, implying that Henry was a boy more suited to games. The implied insult stimulated Henry to go to war with France.

The castle’s fame was heightened when Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, was granted possession by Queen Elizabeth I in 1563 and spent fortunes on its further renovation and conversion into a house suitable for the queen and her court. He built a whole new tower, matching the original, especially for the – for whom he was her notorious favourite – with a grand sitting room and bedroom, a dance floor and separate gatehouse. Some of the in the gatehouse have been furnished as they would have been at the time.



Approaching over wide grassy lawns the sandstone ruin is a highly impressive sight, with the two towers on each side of the central complex of state halls and apartments. Like most EH properties it is a joy to walk round, with an excellent audioguide and good but discretely placed explanatory panels. We wandered through the ruins of the Great Hall, the kitchens and the original keep, with walls four metres thick.

The Dudley-Elizabeth episode is well explored, including a small museum in the gatehouse, and the atmospheric ruins allow a flavour of the times. Dudley caused the creation of an Elizabethan garden for his queen, and this has been redone as exactly as detailed archaeological studies have allowed. There is a lovely view over its symmetry from the remains of the Grand Hall and the queen's rooms.

With a day or two left to spare we decided to drive a bit further north, and take in a revisit to the late Tom Wheatcroft's museum of (mostly) single-seat Grand Prix racing cars at the museum by the circuit he brought back into life. His son now runs the place, and we did not notice much of a change since we last visited several years ago, except that there are now more military vehicles – mostly German – on display. The evolution of the McLaren and Williams F1 cars is interesting, as examples from almost every year are shown in the line-ups, and our memories were jolted by the awful sight of the aerodynamic appurtenances that littered the bodies of the cars in the late 2000s.



We then embarked on a circular tour of the Peak District, the hilly southern end of the Pennine chain. Unfortunately the weather had changed overnight, so we set out in very murky, turning foggy, conditions, with intermittent showers. We headed up through the Dovedale valleys, which were just visible through the mist, and pulled off the main road for a few kilometres to visit the Arbor Low stone circle. This lies on a ridge of hills and was an important ritual site during Neolithic and early Bronze Age periods, between 6,000 and 3,000 years ago.



The circle of white limestone pillars – now lying on their sides – was surrounded by a high bank, still clearly visible, with two entrances now popular with sheep. A large stone lies in the centre. A plaque suggests that the stones were all pushed over in medieval times by people scared of the site's pagan influences. Bronze Age burial mounds are

present near the circle and over a nearby hill.

Ten onwards through the murk and rain, through the old spa town of Buxton and up towards Edale in the High Peak. The weather cleared a little and the scenery here was the most impressive of the run, including a steep pass through rocky clefts in the green hillsides. From there we looped round and started heading south, for the first time in a while, with more great views to the east over rolling green countryside and thousands of sheep enclosed by long, straight, stone walls.

We stopped for a while at Eyam, the “plague village”, made famous by its self-imposed quarantine following its invasion by the bubonic plague. This was brought in by a consignment of cloth from London in 1665 during the pandemic of the Black Death. The village rector, William Mompesson, convinced the villagers that the village



should quarantine itself and its occupants stay put, rather than risk spreading the disease elsewhere. Mompesson survived, but his wife did not, along with scores of other villagers. Death and population figures are disputed, but the death rate in the village was probably about 24%. We saw the “plague cottage” where the epidemic started, but the story is best told in the many books and novels about the tragic episode.



It was time then to return to the farm where we store the van, pending our likely return next year. We were very happy to join up for the day and dinner with a very well-travelled American couple whom we first met in Bulgaria and with whom we have stayed in contact ever since, sharing many interests.

This European summer we travelled a total distance of 10,413 kilometres, a fraction fewer than usual. We and the van are ready to go again next year.

