

Summer Outing

Palace of Westminster

20th June 2011

by PATRICK SHERRATT

As I write this report I turn back to 2007 when we visited the Palace of Westminster and opened the article with, "After days of rain the sun shone on the righteous". Well despite our long periods without rain the weather pattern had altered with rain on most days, but again the sun shone on the righteous with a bright and sunny day.

After our swift travel to London we arrived at the entrance to the Houses of Parliament some 50 minutes before our scheduled tour. Having been advised that we should be at the entrance at least 30 minutes before the tour time we soon experienced how thorough security is. We just about made the allotted tour time, having queued to go through airline type checks as well as being photographed and issued with individual identity passes to be visibly

displayed. Certainly the security, for obvious reasons, has tightened since our last visit.

After the great fire in 1834 when all was destroyed except Westminster Hall and the Jewel Tower, a design competition was held and the architect Charles Barry was successful. At the time a relatively unknown Augustus Pugin was to help Barry and what we see today is the fantastic influence of Pugin and his renowned Gothic revival style.

So with two groups we departed from Westminster Hall to start our tour based on the "Royal Processional Route". Starting at the top of the Royal Staircase we passed into the Queen's Robing Room. Without doubt this elaborately decorated room contains the magnificent frescos based on the story of King Arthur. The artist William Dyce

took 16 years producing these, as painting was only done in the summer when the paint would dry on the wet plaster. In this room are magnificent carved bas-reliefs set into the panelling. The Chair of State is also in this room and it is here that the sovereign puts on the Imperial State Crown and



Houses of Parliament

parliamentary robes. After the destruction of the Commons Chamber in 1941 the Queen's Robing Room was used by the House of Lords (until 1951) whilst the Commons sat in the House of Lords' chamber.

We then moved to the Royal Gallery. This is a vast room some 100ft (30m) long, lined with two historical scenes: the death of Nelson at Trafalgar and the meeting of Wellington and Blücher at Waterloo... quite a problem as parliamentary ceremonies including receptions of visiting statesmen from abroad are held in the gallery. Indeed Charles de Gaulle refused a reception in this room and Mitterrand insisted on covering up the depicted scenes although I am informed that it was not so with Sarkozy who said it shows we have our fights but can make up and get on in this modern world. In this gallery a temporary exhibition is always a feature and on our visit its theme was the execution of Charles I, including a copy of the death warrant.

Onward to the Prince's Chamber, with its Tudor decoration. The room also contains a large neo and classical statue of Queen Victoria, two fine octagonal tables and a set of lion-headed chairs designed by Pugin in the grandest manner.

From the Prince's Chamber there is entry to the House of Lords. Oh, what a disappointment, as the chamber was closed for television or something. Anyway, we were able to peer through the doors to see the grandeur and magnificence of this chamber.



Big Ben

Passing through the Central Lobby with its fine mosaic ceiling and corridors we reached the Commons Chamber, spartan and lacking the opulence of the Lords. In the corridor are various interesting pictures, including Charles II landing at Dover. However, the flag is not quite correct. There is also a very important painting of Speaker William Lenthall on the 4th January 1642 when Charles I entered the House, to arrest five members for treason. He was met with those famous words from Lenthall, "May it please Your Majesty, I have neither eyes to see, nor tongue to speak in this place, but as the House is pleased to direct me"... What a brave man and the true cornerstone of our parliament today as this was the last time a reigning monarch entered the House.

Before entering the chamber we walked through a lobby with many busts and statues of former Prime Ministers. Pippa our guide drew attention to that of Lady Thatcher, who on the unveiling stated that instead of bronze it should be iron.

On to the Division Lobby and the interesting information from our guide that when the division bell rings there are eight minutes before the division doors are closed. I can recall in my younger days when I was working in London that in a certain pub there was a bell that summoned members back to the Division Lobby. Our guide confirmed that the pub I referred to still has a division bell to this day and I reckon at a brisk pace it is two minutes (subject to



Dover Society members meet Charlie Elphicke at the Houses of Parliament

traffic at crossings) to the Palace. So are some of our MPs enjoying a quick dram before a division?

Our tour then took us back to our starting point where Charlie Elphicke met us and took questions. It was good that our Member of Parliament took time out between his hectic life at Westminster, and I am sure that all our members were most appreciative. Also to Katy for making sure Charlie was where he should be at the correct time and as we were also thus ensuring our visit went smoothly.

We then had free time for visiting local attractions and I know some went to Westminster Abbey, others to the War Museum, the Jewel Tower and the National Portrait Gallery. Patricia and I took time to visit the National Gallery and particularly admired the Monet paintings, having a few weeks earlier visited Monet's garden at Giverny. Whatever their choice the members voted the day a great success.



Statue of Oliver Cromwell