

Visit to Pendon Museum September 2010

One sunny Sunday in September some 14 merry twinnings gathered at the Plough Inn in Long Wittenham for a pie and a pint. However, a pub crawl round Oxfordshire was not the purpose of our being there, but a visit to nearby Pendon Museum.

After a good lunch and a pleasant stroll through the picturesque village, the pub landlord allowing us to keep the cars in the car park, we formed an orderly queue at the entrance to the museum. The museum is not so much of a museum rather than an exhibition of the model makers art. It was founded by Australian Roye England in 1954 who was so impressed by the countryside when he first came to England in 1925 that he wanted to preserve a likeness of it for future generations. He had kept meticulous drawings and records in the early years, along with some early models, but when he could see the modern world catching up with the area he decided, with some volunteers, to create the museum to preserve an image of the area in perpetuity.

Whilst there are some exhibits and photographs from the locality in the twenties and thirties, the main attraction comes in the form of three model panoramas. The first, the Madder Valley scene, is set in Wales in the 1930s. This was built by just one man, John Aherne, and is thought to have historical importance as the first instance of a model railway being set in a fully developed landscape.

On the next floor, The Dartmoor scene covers a wider area and is thought to depict the beginnings of a Great Western Railway branch line. Great fun for anyone who likes playing model trains, as it has a full control panel to control the electric trains. I could see Bill Forfar itching to get his hands on it, but like all signalmen, he was getting above his station. The appearance of a volunteer in the middle of it to sort out a crashed train put the scene in context. He looked like a giant from another planet. Very weird.

The third floor was, perhaps, the piece de resistance. For some years now, the volunteers at the museum have been building a panorama to recapture what the Vale of the White Horse might have looked like in the 1920s and 30s. This covers the whole of the floor and is still not yet complete. It is built to the scale of 4mm to 1ft, an odd mixture of metric and imperial measure, probably to fit in with the railway gauge. Whilst the villages are themselves imaginary, most of the buildings are miniatures of real buildings that existed in the pre war years. They have been meticulously and skilfully reconstructed from drawings and photographs of the time. Many of these buildings now no longer exist. Every model, including the trains and trucks, must have taken hours to make and the number of man/woman hours taken to construct the whole scene is impossible to calculate. All built by volunteers giving their time. Certainly not something that could be constructed on a normal commercial basis.

After a truly fascinating afternoon most of us ended up in the tea room. Good tea and cake. Thanks to those who had organised this memorable trip.