

## Visit to Royal Hospital Chelsea April 2010

A blustery day in July found a group of Town Twinners visiting the Royal Hospital Chelsea, the home of the Chelsea Pensioners. After a train journey from Wokingham and bus rides from Waterloo and Victoria, we were able to enjoy an early lunch in the restaurant at the nearby National Army Museum, despite a rather large, noisy contingent of under-fives who presumably were visiting the Kids Zone. We had time for a brief look at some of the Museum exhibits, before making our way to the entrance to the Royal Hospital where we were met by our genial guide, Tom, in his familiar scarlet uniform. He explained that he had been a resident for three years and gave a brief history of the Hospital which was founded by Charles II in 1682 as a retreat for army veterans who had become unfit for duty either through long service or as a result of injury. There are now about 400 resident Pensioners with an average age of 83.

The first impression of the Hospital was of beautiful buildings (designed by Sir Christopher Wren) extensive lawns and the feeling that this was a wonderful, peaceful place in which to spend the later years of life. In order to qualify, most Pensioners aged over 65 had to have served at least 22 years in the Army although this length of service was now being relaxed, and despite fierce opposition, three ex-service *women* were now residents. Once accepted old soldiers surrendered their Army pension, but in return received board, lodging, clothing and round-the-clock medical care if required. About 120 Pensioners are employed on a voluntary basis as guides, chapel staff, ground staff, etc. A new 'Margaret Thatcher Infirmary' was opened in 2009, replacing the previous one which was seriously dilapidated and unable to meet modern standards. So in effect the Hospital combines the roles of sheltered housing, care home and hospice. For the more active Pensioners there is an amenity centre, billiard rooms, library, art classes, a bowling green, croquet lawn and allotment gardens.

Moving inside, we were led into The Great Hall, now the dining hall, a grand space at the end of which was a large mural of Charles II on horseback. There were numerous wooden tables down each side of the Hall, each seating eight people and with attractive candelabra style green shaded lights. From the look of the menu there is no doubt that the Pensioners enjoy hotel style food of a high standard with plenty of choice.

Unfortunately we were unable to enter the Chapel as there was a recording taking place but the entrance doors were open and we could see the impressive altar above which was a large painting of the Resurrection in the half dome of the recess at the end of the Chapel.

Outside once again we completed the tour of the three quadrangles, known as Courts, the main one, the Figure Court being the home of the gilded Charles II statue, as well as being the site of the annual Founders Day Parade. This is attended by a member of the royal family and all Pensioners who are fit enough are on parade; according to Tom, our Guide, it could become rather an ordeal, having to stand for so long, and he had many funny stories to recount about this particular event.

Our final visit was to the Museum. Many of us were very keen to see the kind of accommodation provided for the Pensioners, and finally we were able to see a mock-up of a 'berth', as it is known. It seemed rather small and spartan (only nine foot square) but we were assured that once the occupants had personalised their rooms they could become quite homely, despite the lack of natural light or fresh air. Nevertheless bathroom facilities were inadequate, and for this reason much needed renovation is taking place with the aim of providing study bedrooms twice the size of the current 'berths' together with en suite facilities.

So concluded a most informative and interesting visit, and once again sincere thanks are due to Jill Bowman for organising the visit, sorting out and buying the train tickets, shepherding us on to two buses and getting us off at the right stop outside the National Army Museum, close to the Royal Hospital. A great achievement and very many thanks to her.