

REMS VISIT TO OXFORD

Our visits Secretary asked me to pen a few words about the REMS outing to Oxford – town not gown. The plan was to take a trip on a Salters' Steamer on The Thames in the morning and walk around Jericho in the afternoon. Jericho is the part of Oxford built in the nineteenth century to house workers from the University Press, Lucy's Iron Foundry and the wharfs beside the canal.

We set out from Folly Bridge aboard Iffley, the smallest of the old fleet of Salters' steamers. I remember them from the days just after the war when they really were steamers. Beautiful boats. They still glide through the water at ten knots or more making scarcely a ripple, powered today by diesel engines. When they were driven by steam they looked like proper ships with their pretty, painted funnels.

We sailed downstream as far as Iffley lock, passing where the college barges used to be moored, alas no more. But we did see one which is nowadays used as a tea room by the posh Four Pillars Hotel. As we passed Christ Church Meadows, we could see in the distance the rooms where Lord Cherwell lived. Lord Cherwell, aka Professor Lindemann, Dr Lee's Professor of experimental philosophy (physics to us), was Winston Churchill's scientific adviser during World War II.

On our return upstream our boatman took us under the southern arch of Folly Bridge where the river, when in spate, elegantly demonstrates Bernoulli's principle as it is constricted by the stonework. Friar Roger Bacon had an observatory at the top of a tower straddling the northern end of an earlier bridge where he studied astronomy and optics (he invented the magnifying glass) and practised astrology and alchemy. In his book, written in Latin for Pope Clement IV, he asserted that the Bible and theology are the foundation of all science.

Bacon's tower was later occupied by a man named Welcome who built an extra storey on top. The extra room gave the tower a top heavy look and it became known as Welcome's Folly. The name stuck to the bridge and remained with it even when it was replaced by the present structure in 1827.

We continued upstream through Osney Lock and under Osney Bridge (the lowest bridge on the navigable Thames with literally only a couple of inches clearance above our steamer) to Port Meadow, taking lunch aboard on the way. We landed at a new jetty belonging to The Perch Inn, a watering hole much improved in recent years but now rather up market and expensive. Nevertheless, many of us enjoyed a coffee or a beer there.

Mark Davies, a local historian and author, took over the leadership of the group and led us on a fascinating tour of the river, the canal and Jericho. He told us about the history of Port Meadow and the Oxford Freemen who have the right to graze their horses and cattle there; how Alice Lidell, daughter of

the Dean of Christ Church, and her friends used to row up and down the river with the mathematics don, Charles Dodgson (alias Lewis Carroll); how the stories he told them were collected into the tales of Alice in Wonderland and Alice Through the Looking Glass; and the real meaning of the Treacle Well at Binsey.

He showed us the old swing bridge which took the LMS railway over the canal just by Oxford Station, its worm drive and crown wheel winding gear still in place and visible; and the canal itself with its once busy wharfs. We were shown the basilica-style church of St Barnabas and told of its founder - benefactor, Thomas Combe, Superintendent of the Oxford University Press, and his wife, Martha; he took us to see the flats built on the site of the old Lucy's factory, which made cast iron artefacts like manhole covers, and heavy electrical equipment such as grid transformers.

We paused near Isis Lock, which links the canal with the river, where Mark's own live-aboard narrowboat is moored, and gave us a short history of the evolution of locks; and he sold us copies of his book, *Alice in Waterland* and his guidebook, *A Towpath Walk in Oxford*.

We ended up at Oxford Castle, itself worth a day's visit.

John Temple