

HISTORICAL HAMPSHIRE 2013 (with forays into Sussex and Surrey)

Thursday 5th September

I had previously visited Hampshire with my parents in 1967 and 1968, staying with family friends at their house in Havant, between Portsmouth and Chichester. Alan had never stayed in the area, so we were looking forward to some south coast exploration. Unfortunately, the curse of the holiday virus had us both in its grip – a throaty, chesty little number that seemed to have appeared from nowhere a few days previously.

However, we left Saltash undeterred on a dry morning that promised a sunny day and it did indeed become hot for early September as we travelled along the A38, the A30 and the A303. I rather liked the drive through Wiltshire, especially the sudden sighting of magnificent Stonehenge, standing so proudly – and for so long! It had been a November morning in 1974 when Alan and I had visited the site and wandered in amongst the massive Sarsen stones and the smaller but no less impressive bluestones. I had a sudden hankering to visit again, but it wasn't the right time to succumb to sudden hankerings...

We were having trouble finding somewhere to stop for a break and because Alan had programmed a service area into the Sat Nav that we'd inadvertently missed, Ms Sat Nav was becoming most insistent that we make a U-turn whenever possible. Just as we were beginning to worry about her mental health, we arrived at another service area and managed to drive into it instead of past it. It was a relief to drink, eat and ... well, it was definitely a relief.

The fish, chips and peas we ordered were soon consumed and we were off once more on our travels. There was some heavy traffic as we headed towards Winchester and a road closure caused a spot of bother that led to Ms Sat Nav obsessing again about a U-turn. Actually, we did have to turn around, but that's beside the point!

After being stuck in a minor traffic jam, when the temperature rose to an amazing 29 degrees Centigrade, we made it to Winchester and called in for petrol. There was another long queue of traffic on leaving, but we then progressed to the A272 to Petersfield, a more rural road. It had in fact been a distinctly rural journey past countless hayrolls, hayricks, haystacks, hayracks, haysticks, whatever – there was a whole lot of hay. The countryside itself appeared quite bleached in the sun, either the result of a dry summer or a general post-reaping field look.

Finding our self catering accommodation was straightforward enough, although there were a few turns and bends in the road. We arrived dead on time (but thankfully alive) and were greeted by two small dogs, followed by the owner of Down Park Farm, who showed us around the cabin style accommodation that had been converted from stables. It was all very clean and promised a comfortable enough stay. As soon as the owner left us to our own devices, though, we set to with the kettle and gratefully sank a cup of tea.



Two holiday essentials – maps and tea!

We unpacked, ate a few bits and pieces of food that we'd brought with us and made a visit to Petersfield *Tesco* for supplies. At almost 19.00, the temperature was still a very warm 25C as we drove back on the rural roads underneath leafy tree tunnels. Out in the open, a hot air balloon was slowly sailing through the hazy blue sky on a truly beautiful evening.

In fact it was so beautiful that after we'd returned and unpacked the food, we sat outside on the small area of decking with a glass of wine and looked out over the fields. The sound of many roosting birds mingled with the engine noise of a tractor somewhere in the distance. Some heavy duty power lines marred the idyllic rural scene, but life isn't perfect!

The blue sky began to deepen into twilight and bands of wispy white clouds gradually turned pink, so we called it a day and went inside to watch television. The somewhat unsettling travelling-to-a-strange-place day hadn't really been that bad, but we were both extremely tired and starting to feel viral and chesty again, so hoped we would sleep well enough in a strange bed in a strange place with a strange cough...

Friday 6th September

We did sleep well enough in what turned out to be a comfortable bed with our own posh pillows that were a recent purchase from *Bensons For Beds*, but Alan's throat was giving him trouble and when we pulled up the blinds, we gazed out upon rain, rain and more rain. Over a morning cup of tea, though, we decided that a visit to Winchester might be a good idea, mainly because it has a cathedral and a museum, each with a roof.

After dealing with a couple of minor holiday home hiccups, such as a fire alarm with a rundown battery and no tea towels, we were ready to leave at 09.30. The rain had eased considerably and it was still reasonably warm, so we enjoyed another drive through the leafy tree tunnels. When I remarked on all the trees as we drove on a road that seemed to be cutting right through a wood, Alan reminded me that we were actually in the New Forest area. Of course! In my next life I shall have a much better grasp of geography ... perhaps.

As we drove nearer Winchester, Ms Sat Nav wanted us to go the opposite way to where the road signs pointed and became frantic about a U-turn. Alan ignored her, but on approaching Winchester, decided to use the Park & Ride system. We easily found a car park and waited a short while for a bus, which when it arrived was new and comfortable. The bus driver was very helpful and when we got off the bus five minutes later in the centre, it had stopped raining.

It was only a short walk to Tourist Information, where we picked up some leaflets and bought a few postcards. After that, another short walk brought us to *Costa Coffee*, where we naturally availed ourselves of some caffeine. As we sat in a cosy window alcove seat for two and watched the passers by, I realised that Winchester was reminding me a little of York.

Although the streets weren't quite as narrow, there were a lot of old buildings that housed shops underneath with Regency and Elizabethan bow fronted windows. Many of the shops themselves were of the independent, interesting variety, such as enticing little bakeries and bookshops that promised first editions amongst the sought after and the esoteric. I was becoming romantically historical, or else it was just a very good cappuccino!

However, the cathedral beckoned and the fine, misty rain that had now decided to fall did nothing to dampen our spirits. It didn't have much chance to dampen our clothes, either, as the cathedral wasn't very far away. I couldn't recall if I'd been inside that wonderful Gothic building in the 1960s, but I swear I remember being amused to walk past it at the very least, because there was a song called *Winchester Cathedral* out at the time by *The New Vaudeville Band*. Also, the reredos looked familiar, which is a phrase you tend not to say very often.

Once inside the hallowed doors, we wandered around quite happily for at least two hours gazing at the amazing architecture, fixtures and fittings. There seemed to be a great number of memorials to those who had died in so many conflicts over the centuries, as well as memorials and tombs of well known local people, including past bishops.



The memorable reredos

The history of Winchester and the cathedral itself was very interesting, too. Once an important walled Roman town called *Venta Belgarum* (I just love those Roman names), Winchester later became the Saxon capital of Wessex, *Wintanceaster*, before becoming the capital of England under King Alfred the Great. I confess I had no idea Winchester was so historically significant.

In 642, the first Christian church was built in Winchester by the first Christian king of Wessex, King Cynegils. His son Cenwalh (or Coenwealh, which is even harder to pronounce) later built a new church that became a bishop's seat of some standing during the 670s – and I did enjoy writing that oxymoron. Known as Old Minster, this cathedral was built on the site of an earlier Roman church that had later been used for Saxon worship and became the most important royal church in Anglo Saxon England.

By 1000, Old Minster was a thriving priory church for a community of Benedictine monks, a renowned healing place of pilgrimage and a final resting place of West Saxon kings. However, in 1066 William the Conqueror was living up to his name and had taken control. Thus after 450 years, Old Minster was demolished as a new Norman cathedral was built – begun in 1079 by Bishop Walkelin, it was finally consecrated in 1093.

A major rebuilding phase took place in the mid 14th century, followed by progressive work extensions and alterations throughout the centuries (although parts of the original building survive, including the crypt). Significant restoration work took place during 1905 to 1912, when the waterlogged foundations were reinforced by divers under the direction of architect Sir Thomas Graham Jackson and engineer Sir Francis Fox, who were credited with saving the cathedral from complete collapse.

We were gazing in awe at a niche where there was an ancient mural, when a guide approached who was clearly extremely interested in this area, namely the Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre. He asked if we'd like him to explain, so we said yes – he was about 70 and had been a guide for many years (although I personally would have thought he'd have been a scout). In any case, he told us that we were looking at the finest example of 12th century murals in the country.



A fine example indeed!

Kay Santillo, 2013.

It had been discovered in 1963 that the mural then visible was covering a mural underneath, which turned out to be the 12th century one - this happened when a piece of the later mural fortuitously fell off. The later mural was taken down and preserved at the other end of the chapel. Experts were called in and the conditions in the chapel were carefully monitored in order to best preserve the ancient art. In these optimum conditions other parts of the older mural gradually began to appear – noticed by our guide, who was basically told he was imagining things. However, parts of the old mural have been appearing ever since.

The images themselves included the raising of Lazarus, the entry into Jerusalem, the crucifixion, the entombment and a sepulchre scene. It was believed that the original mural had been painted over because of two main inconsistencies, one being a golden domed mosque and another the image of a Roman soldier in chain mail – neither around at the time of Jesus' death. It appeared that the later mural also had inconsistencies, but I'm not sure about them. I was trying to listen intelligently and it was difficult!

Another younger lady joined us and seemed to ask pertinent questions with ease, while some other people also tagged along for a while to this impromptu talk. The guide even produced his laptop and showed us pictures in more detail on the screen – he really was passionate about it, shining his torch on relevant parts of the mural itself so we could see more clearly. In the end he ran out of steam and/or information, so we thanked him sincerely and moved on.

There was an unusual exhibition called *Quietus*, which is the name for the moment of transition when a soul leaves a body. I'm not morbidly fascinated by death, but I do have a definite interest in the subject, as it's actually such an intrinsic part of life. The exhibition was by British potter Julian Stair, addressing through his pottery the containment of the human body in death. There were many vessels for this purpose, from cinerary jars to life size sarcophagi and I do appreciate a good sarcophagus – but I also just like the word and its very pleasing plural! I'd noticed a few sarcophagi outside the cathedral that were sadly off limits.

On the same theme, a further disappointment was that some mortuary chests thought to contain the bones of Anglo Saxon royal family members (including King Cnut who died in 1035) were currently not on view, as they were being conserved and restored. However, there was plenty more to see, including some beautifully painted icons and a lovely painted ceiling in a somewhat dark but very serene Guardian Angels' Chapel.

We walked up some stairs in the south transept and there right in front of us was a wonderful 17th century library of numerous rare books resting on their original carved shelves, all donated by George Morley, Bishop of Winchester from 1662 to 1684. In an adjoining room was one of the treasures of the cathedral, the Winchester Bible, written by hand by a single monk (although I'd always understood monks didn't marry). It had been commissioned in 1160 by Henri de Blois, grandson of William the Conqueror and Bishop of Winchester for over 40 years.

We'd no sooner stood gazing at the first open page exhibit underneath its glass case for a few seconds, when a guide approached us and asked if we'd like him to tell us about it. How could we say no! Actually, we didn't want to say no, as I for one was already imagining myself scribing busily away at such a task in a previous life as a monk – single, of course.

Vellum, otherwise known as calfskin parchment, had been used to accommodate the size of the pages, which were 23 by 15.75 inches (583 by 396 mm). It took six years, but was never completed, as when Henri de Blois died, the money was no longer forthcoming. Always money!

The illumination on the page we were studying was amazing, especially for something over eight centuries old. The colours were still vivid, crafted using gold leaf, copper (green), lead (silver) and lapis lazuli (blue) – the latter from Afghanistan. The guide offered us a magnifying glass so we could see the detail more closely and it really was astonishing to see the facial features of the people. When Alan replaced the magnifying glass a little less than gently back on the glass case, the guide very graciously advised us to be careful, as it was possible to set off the alarm system if too much force was used – as he himself had done in the past.

Other people were coming in and going out after walking around the eight or so display cases all the time the guide was talking to us, I found it mildly embarrassing to have been singled out for such attention! Eventually though, we were able to thank the guide and walk around the rest of the display before leaving the room and escaping down the stairs again.

After further photography in the vast ancient building, we went up more stairs to the Triforium Gallery to see a display of artefacts. We stood for a while looking out over the rail when yet another guide approached us and began to say interesting things (about the Triforium Gallery!) I have to confess I was more or less guided out by then, but thankfully not literally, and attempted to avoid eye contact as I shuffled along the rail a little to distance myself.

There was a wonderful ceiling, although it apparently dated from later than the old part of the cathedral in which we were standing. Indeed, there were some impressive and somewhat massive ancient timbers in situ that were to have been originally used in a different design. However, as more people came up the stairs we were able to edge away completely and wander around to look at the artefacts in peace.

I knew I was tiring and had also been aware from time to time that I was still waging war with the virus, but had successfully overridden this by the incredible sensation of walking through ages past (and no doubt waxing romantically historical most of the time). Time – yes, time. As we at last found ourselves near the exit, I saw it was nearly 13.30. So, we left the hallowed building and went to sit on the dry wall outside facing the cathedral and we didn't half enjoy our cheese rolls and Walkers Sunbites Sour Cream and Cracked Black Pepper crisps!

As I sat there merrily munching and idly perusing our leaflets, it occurred to me that we'd failed to find Jane Austen's grave. I'd originally thought it must be outside the cathedral, but was unsure. Thanks to Alan enquiring a short while later in the gift shop, we were able to go back inside the cathedral (our tickets were valid for 12 months) and easily locate the rather sombre and understated gravestone on the floor.

People were queuing up to take photos of it, but many seemed to be missing the nearby and much brighter brass memorial tablet with fresh flowers underneath. Above that, there was even a stained glass memorial window, although it was way too high up to see properly. Anyway, I felt pleased that we'd done Jane Austen justice. I'm not a particular fan of hers, but I do admire and respect her very much – and I also felt that I was acting on behalf of my daughter and my mother, who *are* particular fans!

Emerging again into the now sunny afternoon, we decided to walk to the relatively close Wolvesey Castle, or Winchester's Old Bishop's Palace. I suppose bishops are usually a bit on the old side, so the name isn't exactly ageist. Anyway, our walk took us past some ancient looking buildings and also Winchester College. The ancient looking buildings were intriguing, but there just wasn't enough time to take in even more history, so we continued to the ruins of Wolvesey Castle managed by English Heritage, admission free.



Wolvesey Castle, residence of old bishops...

Kay Santillo, 2013.

The building had been the residence of bishops from Anglo Saxon times and the ruins date mostly from 12th century improvements of the aforementioned Bishop Henri de Blois. The last great occasion within its once palatial walls had been in 1554, when Queen Mary and Philip of Spain partook of their wedding breakfast before heading off to the cathedral to be married. I'm not sure people use the word *partook* much now, but it fits the historical milieu of Winchester.

The castle had witnessed the rather exciting Rout of Winchester, when Empress Matilda (daughter and heir of King Henry I) had assaulted Bishop Henri de Blois in 1141 during a time known as The Anarchy. The besieged defenders of the castle had set fire to Winchester, destroying most of the old town but holding Empress Matilda's forces at bay until King Stephen's wife, Countess Matilda of Boulogne, arrived from London with reinforcements. King Stephen, half brother of Henri de Blois, was also from Blois in middle France. Blois, Blois, Blois!

It was no good, I was now seriously beginning to wane historical at almost 15.00 and so we left the famous flinty ruins. A short but weary walk to the Park & Ride bus stop brought us within close proximity of an imposing statue of Alfred the Great, named on the statue as simply *Aelfred*, who had been originally buried in Winchester's Old Minster. I considered a final historical photo of the day, but my legs seemed rooted to the spot and then the bus arrived...

The journey back to Down Park Farm was uneventful and we decided on a quick and easy pizza for tea. The sky clouded over as evening arrived, but we were cosy enough and had good books to read. It had been a most interesting and enjoyable day, marred only by the fact that I realised we'd failed to see one of the oldest parts of Winchester Cathedral, namely the crypt – and as for the museum, it just hadn't had a look in!

Saturday 7th September

Neither of us slept well, Alan because of his virus and me because my head had remained full of Winchester Cathedral for hours on end ... and also because of Alan's virus. We therefore awoke somewhat groggily at around 07.30 and discovered that Alan's voice was incredibly deep and croaky, with tones that seemed to emanate from a frog with Barry White aspirations. Thankfully, for both Alan and me, drinking tea and eating breakfast helped.

I must have been more tired than I thought, as I mindlessly applied hair conditioner to one leg and rubbed it in before realising that it felt a different consistency to the moisturiser I should have been using. I couldn't be bothered to wash it off and start again, so spent the day with one moisturised leg and one conditioned leg. There are worse things...

Although it was sunny, it had rained in the night and looked to be a mixed weather day as we set off for the village of Crondall, where Alan's mother's family had once lived in the early 19th century. We soon drove from underneath a blue sky occasionally obscured by leafy tree tunnels into extensive cloud cover that was trying very hard to be black, or more disturbingly, 50 shades of grey. When it came, the rain was heavy and prolonged as expected, but it had fortunately lessened a great deal by the time we arrived at All Saints Church in Crondall, the scene of several ancestral family baptisms, marriages and burials.

Like the village, the church was bigger than I had expected, its older parts dating from about 1170 when Bishop Henri de Blois (him again) had decided that a church be built on the site of an earlier Saxon building. The graveyard was also on the large side, with graves ranging from the ancient and indecipherable to the newly dug. It was clear from flowers decorating the entrance archway that there was going to be a wedding, so we went inside straight away.

The interior seemed a little on the dark side, but there were some very interesting stained glass windows and I do like an interesting stained glass window. The stone font was apparently Saxon, although very plain and therefore not especially pretty. While Alan did his photographic thing with an improvised tripod borrowed from the church furniture, I investigated some medieval graffiti. This was in the form of crosses carved in the door jamb by knights who would traditionally carry out a vigil in their local church before a ceremony of knighthood, or before heading off for a crusade. That would have made it, of course, a knight night vigil.

I almost jumped when a figure appeared in the doorway, but it wasn't the ghost of a knight, just a lady who had obviously arrived to do something purposeful. That was my cue to murmur hello and escape outside, while Alan put back his improvised tripod. He soon joined me and we wandered around the churchyard, as the sun had once again appeared. We found no family gravestones, but I was interested to learn that the church and churchyard had been a strategic outpost for Roundheads (although changing hands a few times) during the Civil War, without ever being bombarded. Judging from the car we saw arrive with people in posh clothes, the church was about to be bombarded with wedding guests, so we made a timely exit.



Bombarded only by people

Alan's throat was bothering him and he was hankering after a hot coffee, but we had no idea where to find one in Crondall, so he eased the troubled parts with some water and a mini-muffin that we had in the car for such emergencies, which sounds strange. I still wasn't feeling wonderful or particularly awake myself, so was glad it had been a slow, gentle morning.

After consulting the National Trust handbook, we decided a slow, gentle afternoon at one of their nearby properties was a good idea and so we travelled back towards Petersfield for about half an hour. Our destination was the somehow typically Hampshire name of Hinton Ampner, where we parked on grass underneath a tree and ate our packed lunch. It was a popular venue, with many visitors of all ages (which is always a good omen).

Although there was a house to see, we just wandered around the garden with our cameras, trying to decide whether to keep the rain jacket on or take it off – on or off, it was a constant decision as the temperature changed throughout the afternoon according to the cloud cover.



Topiary or not topiary, that is the question...

Kay Santillo, 2013.

There were some expansive rural views and some pretty hibiscus shrubs, not to mention a walled garden in which we strolled around happily for quite a while until the viral fatigue (as well as Alan's coughing) hit again. Fortunately, there was a spacious tea room where we gladly sat to enjoy a hot drink. Although it was only about 14.30 and the afternoon was relatively young, we felt relatively old and decided to leave Rampant Hinter, or whatever it was called, to mosey along the rural roads back to Down Park Farm.

The rest of the day was spent pleasantly enough with a book and a baked potato, though not at the same time. Alan was still suffering with his throat, but made it to the end of the drive to pick a few apples from the trees, as the owner had invited us to do so. Television was hopeless at 21.00, so we dragged our weary bodies off to bed early for our third Hampshire night.

Sunday 8th September

We both slept a lot better, thank heavens – being exceptionally tired helped! We were still somewhat virally compromised, but the weather was sunny with showers and so we decided to visit Chichester. As we were getting ready, though, we received some very sad news from home that was a tremendous shock. However, as it wasn't our immediate family and there was nothing we could actually do (except send a card) we thought that the best option was to carry on with the day as planned. What a strange ride this life of ours can be.

It turned out to be a bit of a strange ride into Chichester along different rural roads, as we became caught up in some sort of cycle rally or convention. I've never seen so many cyclists! It was rather dangerous and irritating to be honest, because most of them refused to keep in to the left and were riding two or three abreast. Not only did this cause tailbacks along the bendy roads, but the cyclists seemed unpredictable and unaware of what was happening around them. Still, I'm happy to say we made it to the Northgate car park in one piece.

We'd read that Chichester is a walled city, so set off into the pedestrianised centre to locate Tourist Information. We first came to a card shop, so were able to buy a card and shelter from the heavy rain that suddenly came pouring down. We then continued our way along wet pavements and entered Tourist Information with wet shoes that left wet footmarks on the clean dry floor. We were the only customers and I felt rather wetly conspicuous, so was happy to escape after Alan enquired about walking around the walls and was given a leaflet (thankfully not a wet one).

It was only a five minute walk to where we could join the walls and almost straight away there was a good view across to the cathedral. In fact, I have since realised that I visited Chichester Cathedral (and therefore Chichester) in 1967, but we decided to give it a miss in favour of the walls. As for the walls, they weren't as well defined or as clearly signposted as York's, but it was a most enjoyable morning's occupation, especially in the sad circumstances of the day.

We soon came across the Bishop's Palace Garden behind the cathedral, where there was some very colourful planting in front of the perfectly fitting backdrop of the red brick wall.



History and flowers – heaven!

Kay Santillo, 2013.

This section of the walls walk was understandably the most popular, but after we'd moved on, the walls seemed to disappear. However, with the aid of the not-very-clear leaflet and Alan's common sense, we relocated another section and sat down on a handy wooden bench to eat our sandwiches. I'd learned en route that the current city centre stands on the foundations of the Romano British city of *Noviomagus Reginorum*, an impressive name if ever I heard one.

We'd earlier walked past the central market cross from which the north, south, east and west streets radiate and this to my mind makes Chichester rather a logical, tidy little city. The original walls had been over 2 metres thick with a steep ditch and survived for over 1500 years, but were later replaced by a thinner Georgian wall. Chichester had been one of the fortified towns established by King Alfred in 878-9, making use of the remaining Roman walls. By the time of the Domesday Book in 1085-6, it had 300 dwellings and 1500 inhabitants.

After lunch we resumed the wall walk, but as the entire length of the walls was just short of 1.5 miles, we had finished the circuit by about 13.15. An interesting building along the way had been the Guildhall Museum, once a Franciscan priory sacked by Henry VIII's men, but unfortunately only open on Saturdays. Close by was an old motte, but come to think of it, I don't suppose there are any new mottes around these days. What I found a rather jarring sight, though, was the new children's play area right beside the old Norman motte!

Alan was desperate for a hot drink again, so we went into the nearest coffee shop and revived the inner person, while deciding to go on to Fishbourne Roman Palace where the mosaics were under cover – the cloud situation was looking volatile. As Ms Sat Nav directed us to our destination (keeping quiet for once about U-turns) we seemed to be driving into a modern housing estate. Actually we probably were, as the Roman remains are in Fishbourne village.

On entering the building, it felt a bit like visiting a Time Team team, as the people at the desk were so enthusiastic, jolly and confident – clearly university types, which sounds a bit type-ist on my part. We were just in time to catch a talk starting at 14.30, so congregated with about 25 others around a model of the whole site, where a lady in her 60s described how it (the site itself, not the model) had been discovered and excavated, etc.

This took only 10 minutes or so before we were handed over to a man in his late 40s, who was the epitome of a university lecturer if ever I saw one – a very good one, who clearly knew his mosaics if that doesn't sound too peculiar. We were led to the various areas of exhibits and treated to an informative and humorous 30 minutes or so of learning and delight (just like a prolonged Time Team end-of-programme explanation for non-archaeological plebs like me). I can't speak for Alan, except to say that he succumbed to a coughing fit severe enough for me to hand him my bottle of water, hoping he wouldn't spill it over the mosaics...



'Cupid on a dolphin' mosaic

At about 15.00 we had a break before the next talk at 15.30, so Alan and I walked around the mosaic flooring site taking photos, while outside the heavens opened. It rained so heavily that as we convened again, the 'lecturer' said it appeared we'd displeased the gods!

The second talk was just as good as the first one and we were both glad we'd stayed for it, even though Alan was visibly tired and had another coughing fit. As we were set free, the sun tenuously emerged, so we headed quickly towards the garden area and walked around, looking with interest at all the plants and herbs the Romans used to grow. We didn't stay long, as the gods were clearly in a dodgy mood, but made a few purchases in the gift shop and had a quick perusal of the museum section before leaving altogether at 16.50.

Alan was able to drive the car back at his own pace, without any cyclists or even many cars on the road. My journey was punctuated by some textual repartee with our son Dan, who had been imbibing a Sunday afternoon gin and tonic and was amusing himself with witty comments in my direction. It was genuinely uplifting, to be honest, as the day's sad news was still sinking in. A quiet evening with a glass of red wine, a fishfinger sandwich, a Müller yoghurt, some chocolate and some mindless television certainly hit the spot, wherever that was.

Monday 9th September

Sometime around the crack of dawn this morning I achieved the vast age of 61, although I can actually remember being 16 quite well! The aftermath of the previous day's news still felt very sad and weird, but I had birthday cards and presents to open, so we sat with a cup of tea and I got down to business. There was a definite butterfly theme, although the likelihood of seeing any actual butterflies outside seemed remote in view of the rainy, overcast morning.

We were thus a little late with our day's outing, so decided to return to Winchester and finish off what we hadn't had time for on Friday. By the time we left at 10.00, the rain was easing and on arrival at Winchester's centre from the Park & Ride bus, it had stopped. We walked along to *Costa Coffee* as before and sat in the same seats by the window as before, although we didn't actually drink the same coffee as before...

Suitably caffeinated, we made a quick detour to *Marks & Spencer* to buy sandwiches and crisps for an early lunch, which we then transported the short distance to the cathedral and consumed while sitting on the wall (almost in the same place as before) and indulging in a spot of good old fashioned people watching. Most people were reasonably modern, though.

It might sound like overkill, but we went inside the cathedral again to visit the crypt that we'd previously overlooked. To be honest, it was a little underwhelming compared to its write-up and picture, but I was glad we'd seen it. Alan took a few more photos of other areas, before we lit a candle and finally left that most inspiring, astonishing, historical building.

Our next destination was the Hospital of St Cross, the oldest and largest almshouse in England, founded in the 1130s by the ubiquitous Henri de Blois. Our leaflet said an ideal way of getting there was on foot for less than a mile from the city centre alongside the River Itchen. I'm sure there's a dubious joke waiting to be made about itching, but I don't even want to scratch the surface. Anyway, we ended up walking along several streets – but interesting streets with very old houses – until we arrived at a building quite unlike any I've seen before.



Tudor cloister of the Hospital of St Cross

Kay Santillo, 2013.

It was easy to imagine it in use in bygone centuries, its purpose to provide accommodation for (according to the leaflet): "...thirteen poor men, feeble and so reduced in strength that they can scarcely or not at all support themselves without other aid." In the 15th century a second foundation, the Almshouse of Noble Poverty, was added to provide help for gentry who had fallen on hard times.

Once inside the inner quadrangle, we gazed around at the buildings for photographic purposes, slightly peeved that some builders' vans were parked in the way, as the church was being renovated. Looking across the quadrangle at the long building that used to be the hospital, there were a couple of mobility scooters that also made photography less than ideal. Alan went haring off to this other side to take a photo of the Tudor cloister, at which point I noticed a notice (as you do) advising that the hospital side was private, no entry. I tried to alert him but he didn't hear me, so I disowned him and loitered purposefully in the nearby church porch.

We were disappointed when we went inside the church to find that parts of it were blocked off, including the altar. This was due to the church tower being repaired and involved scaffolding both inside and outside the church. However, there were some lovely stained glass windows and a 12th century font. Reading a notice as I waited for Alan to finish with his camera and another improvised tripod, I realised that the hospital continues to provide accommodation for about 25 elderly gents, still known as Brothers – hence the mobility scooters!

After emerging, we went for a stroll around the garden to ease the somewhat vexed soul. To our surprise, it was quite a delightful and well cared for garden, with several mature, unusual trees, a large rectangular pond complete with lily pads and wide, innovatively planted borders – very tranquil, especially as we were the only ones there apart from one gentleman (presumably a visitor rather than the noble poor variety).

Our visit appeared to be over after that, so we left to look for the meandering walk alongside the River Itchen. We found it, along with a builders' van whose occupants reliably informed us the path was closed. It was just as well we were forced to walk back along the streets as it turned out, because halfway along, the gathering clouds deposited their load and we were able to shelter underneath some overhanging trees, with the added benefit of Alan's umbrella.

It was while we were thus waiting that a text arrived from our daughter Rachel to wish me a happy birthday. She was on honeymoon in America (suitably with husband Antoine), waiting to go on a helicopter flight over the Grand Canyon, which on the whole is slightly more exciting than waiting underneath a dripping tree in the streets of Winchester for the rain to stop! It certainly lifted the vaguely dampened spirits and the rain soon began to ease.

As it was only just gone 14.00 by the time we returned to the city centre and the museum was nearby, we went inside for a fascinating perusal of ancient artefacts, mostly Roman, with some Anglo Saxon ones for good measure. In a different area we came across reconstructed 19th and 20th century shops, where some of the items looked worryingly familiar...

We were both wilting spectacularly by the time we left the museum, so dragged ourselves along to the Park & Ride bus stop, where a bus obligingly arrived after a few minutes and transported us back to the car park. The usual drive along the leafy tree tunnel roads back to Down Park Farm followed and a pizza fuelled the flagging life force. Some raspberries and ice cream were the icing on the cake – at which point it occurred to me that there had been no birthday cake! No birthday cake!!

Tuesday 10th September

I managed to sleep despite the trauma of the missing birthday cake ... but I only speak in jest. Alan, on the other hand, woke up after a night of intermittent coughing and could only speak in very deep tones that wouldn't have put Barry White himself to shame. However, the magic cup of tea worked wonders and instead of waking to the steady drip of rain, we felt invigorated by the welcome appearance of the sun – so decided there and then that this would be the day of our long awaited visit to RHS Wisley in Surrey.

We were ready to leave just before 09.30 and drove along a much busier road than any since we'd arrived. In fact, it became steadily worse as we approached closer to London and I was glad when it was time to turn off, even though the journey had only been about 45 minutes.

From the size of the car park, we could tell the garden was big – 240 acres, compared to the two other RHS gardens we've visited, RHS Rosemoor at 65 acres and RHS Harlow Carr at 58 acres. Not that size matters, of course, not even the size of the queue as we went in search of coffee. Actually it was fine, as was the coffee itself and the perfectly sized cookie we shared.

It was time to hit the flower scene! As we began our walk around the garden, we realised we hadn't actually been given a map, so followed our noses through many areas all planted according to the habitat. We were intrigued by a diverse collection of sculptures that kept popping up in various places, in all sorts of sizes and made from different materials. Some of them were quite evocative and meaningful, although others I found a bit too obscure and arty for my liking – but I'm happy to say they added a certain *je ne sais quoi* to our visit.

We soon made our way to the massive Glass House (40 feet/12 metres high) where we spent well over an hour wandering happily through the tropical zone, the moist temperate zone and the dry temperate zone. I was impressed with the range of flowers in the tropical zone and all of the specimens in general, ranging from the bizarre to the beautiful. Alan was in seventh heaven, possibly eighth, as he took many, many photos. The display of cacti was also amazing, but I began to feel slightly headachey with the atmosphere and went outside in the cooler, fresher air to await the emergence of Alan and his camera.



In the Glass House

We were surprised to realise it was already lunch time, so made our way to one of the wooden benches placed in random but strategic positions, this one overlooking the Glass House and its surrounding lake. Fortunately, nobody was sitting on it (the bench, not the lake). The sky began to look increasingly cloudy as we ate our cheese sandwiches and crisps, but there were still several resilient patches of blue and everywhere remained thankfully dry.

There had been lots of people walking around all the time we'd been there, but the whole place was so big that there was literally plenty of space for everyone, which has got to be in its favour. In fact, I feel a slight confession coming on when I say that we'd deliberately avoided the RHS Wisley Flower Show that had been running for five days until Sunday, just so we could look around the place in relative peace!

Our afternoon mission was therefore to continue perusing in relative peace the areas we so far hadn't reached, hoping the clouds would fail to release their contents. I even located a Visitor Map leaflet in a stand, which would have helped a lot earlier in the visit, but was a small point to be miffed about in such an uplifting place. We particularly enjoyed the Rock Garden with its huge rocks, as well as the beautiful specimens in the Alpine Houses and the Bonsai Walk. The inspirational planting of the mixed borders created a colourful vibrancy and there was the wonderful feeling that we never knew what delight we would come across next.



Pink power

However, tiredness was setting in fast and with the best will in the world, our still virally compromised bodies were complaining, not to mention coughing. Alan's voice had begun to sound gravelly, albeit decorative garden gravel rather than the heavy duty industrial variety. We kept going for as long as was humanly possible, before passing through the gift shop in a slight daze and buying nothing because it all seemed a little pricey (but stopping to purchase a takeaway hot drink for Alan before the rigours of the drive back).



Reluctant to leave!

The road was much clearer on the return journey, especially as we drove further away from London. Upon our return to Down Park Farm, it was lovely just to while away the rest of the day in relaxing pursuits, mainly reading and watching television. Our evening meal consisted of baked potato with tinned salmon, followed by raspberries and ice cream – simple but enjoyable. Although there had been no rain all day, the forecast for our last day tomorrow was a dry morning with rain coming in later. We shall see!

Wednesday 11th September

Alan slept better, with just one coughing fit. I was restless, especially when the fire alarm started to ping insistently at prolonged intervals because of its low battery (despite having behaved perfectly for the past four nights). In the end, Alan removed the offending object.

At 07.30 when we surfaced properly for the day, there was a pale blue sky streaked with a lot of white cloud. It was noticeable that the temperature had dropped quite considerably since the day we'd arrived and by the time we left at 09.30, it was a mere 15C. However, it can't be denied that for the time of year it could have been a whole lot worse.

We'd considered going to Portsmouth, but opted instead for a quieter day at another National Trust garden – it's safe to say that a future further visit to Hampshire and surrounding area is highly likely. Actually, our chosen garden of the day was Nymans in West Sussex, described as a "garden lovers' home". Never mind the home, we wanted to experience the garden!

It took us just over an hour to drive there with the journey quite slow in places, but rather pleasant along several of the now familiar leafy tree tunnel roads that must be a nightmare in autumn. As we got out of the car, it seemed somewhat cool and end of summerish, but there were still plenty of sunny intervals. This was good, as I realised I'd left my raincoat behind.

Alan felt in need of a hot drink again and I wasn't averse, so our first stop was at the clean, bright restaurant with both indoor and outdoor seating that offered tempting home made food. We succumbed to a shared slice of Victoria sandwich with our coffee indoors, before heading outdoors towards the beckoning delights of the garden.

It was indeed delightful! A late 19th century estate of around 600 acres, the house had been partially destroyed by fire in 1947, the ruins of which served only to enhance the overall romantic atmosphere by looking like an authentic Gothic garden feature. There was so much vibrant colour still in the summer borders that people were stopping and staring appreciatively.



Vibrant, colourful borders

There had been a guided walk on offer when we'd arrived, but we preferred to do our own floral thing with our cameras, as so often happens! One area we particularly enjoyed was the South African garden, which wasn't large and quite a few of its flowers were past their best, but we liked the feel of it – so much so that we sat near it to eat our cheese sandwiches and crisps. There was hardly anyone around, the sun shone for a while and it was enchanting.

After that, we continued to meander for a while longer, before investigating the shop and deciding everything was a little bit pricey – I suspect more money floats around Hampshire, Sussex and Surrey compared to down and out (but very beautiful) Devon and Cornwall.

The drive back was similar to the drive there – still no rain – and we enjoyed yet another very relaxed late afternoon and evening. It was time to use up odds and ends of remaining food, which is always quite a creative challenge at the end of a self catering stay. It did actually begin to rain mid evening and became dark early, but it really didn't matter.

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On the whole, it had been a much enjoyed holiday, although there was no doubt that the virus and the sad news took their toll. It had been a joy to visit new places, as well as a re-visit for me to Winchester and Chichester. It's a fascinating area to explore with something for everyone and I very much look forward next time to delving further into more history, more gardens and some of the many beautiful coastal destinations, not least the Isle of Wight. I suspect we might give Peppa Pig World a miss, though!