

## Westminster Abbey Cobbett's Wey DFAS Tour

Far from a shiver, that one might suppose a trip to London on a January evening might bring, Cobbett's Wey tour of Westminster Abbey left us tingling with warmth and pleasure. We feasted our eyes on more than a thousand years of history, from the Benedictine monks who first came to this site in the middle of the tenth century to John Betjeman's commemoration in Poet's Corner...



"Let me take this other glove off,  
As the vox humana swells,  
And the beauteous fields of Eden,  
Bask beneath the Abbey bells.  
Here, where England's statesmen lie,  
Listen to a lady's cry" ...

(extract from 'In Westminster Abbey' by John Betjeman)



We heard how the Abbey has been the coronation church since 1066 and the final resting place of seventeen monarchs (and their significant others) namely in alphabetical order: Queen Anne, Anne Neville, wife of Richard III, Anne of Cleves, 4th wife of Henry VIII, Charles II, Edward I and Eleanor of Castile, Edward III and Philippa of Hainault, Edward the Confessor and Edith, Edward V, Edward VI, Elizabeth I, George II and Caroline, Henry III, Henry V and Catherine de Valois, Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, James I and Anne of Denmark, Mary I, Mary II, Mary Queen of Scots, Maud (Matilda) wife of Henry I, Richard II and Anne of Bohemia and William III.

No one could say that the tour lacked a memorial stone to read as we interlaced our way around both familiar and rarely seen regions of the Abbey. The Nave, The Quire, The Lantern, The Sanctuary, St. Edward's Chapel, The Coronation Chair, Henry VII's Chapel and side chapels, Poet's Corner, The Musicians Aisle and lastly the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior.



Along the tour we gazed at the treasure the Abbey holds of paintings, stained glass, pavements, textiles and other artefacts. We looked up to see the magnificent ceilings and architectural structure and we looked down to tiptoe around the perimeter of the Cosmati pavement in front of the High Altar (laid down in 1268 by order of Henry III), a unique and remarkable mosaic whose complexity and subtlety of design and workmanship can be seen nowhere else on this scale.

We scanned and read chiselled words on burial and commemorative plaques venerating some of the most significant people in our nation's history. We cupped our ears to hear historical facts and anecdotal stories from our guide for the evening who sung in the choir at Elizabeth II's Coronation, most probably mezza voce! He told us ancient stories that could well be mistaken for today's tabloid headlines - Graffiti etched on priceless royal chair! Congregation fight - wooden relics used as makeshift weapons! He pointed to tombs shielded with high spiked grills (presumably to stop people from getting in rather than escaping) and he visibly shuffled from foot to foot, as he pointed out the 'accidental damage' caused by choir boys who's challenge it was to circumnavigate the Abbey without touching the floor - by nimble use of unfortunately placed protrusions of 'once' incalculable value as... hand and foot holds.



Whilst visual and mental images were presented to us in quick succession we heard divine A cappella interjections from the Purcell Club choristers singing appropriate musical items at each resting pew, seat or bench as we paused for reflection.

Then, finally to see us on our way, we were treated to almost 7,000 reverberating organ pipes from the Harrison and Harrison organ installed for the Coronation of King George VI in 1937.

With the thin resonating sound of the 'Last Post' echoing around the architectural opulence of Westminster Abbey we walked around the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier - laid in black Belgium marble and edged with bright red poppies - a truly memorable tour.

A big thank you to Sue Main whose organisational skills ensured we all felt privileged to have been present at our Westminster Abbey, Cobbett's Wey DFAS event.