

The Arts Society Leatherhead

Evening historic and musical tour of Westminster Abbey

On Saturday 17th November, a group of fifty members of The Arts Society Leatherhead had a private historic and musical tour of Westminster Abbey which was organised by The Purcell Club (named after the 17th century composer and former Abbey organist) who are former Abbey Choristers. The Club collects money for small charities for their performances.

The event started with supper in the Cellarium restaurant in the medieval undercroft of the Abbey – which was where the monks in medieval times stored the vegetables from their kitchen garden. It was a magical time to visit the Abbey as many members had vivid recollections of watching the 100th anniversary service of the end of the First World War on TV the previous Sunday. The tomb of the Unknown Warrior was still surrounded by red poppies, and the flowers from the previous week's service were still perfect. Some members also went out to see the very moving ranks of remembrance crosses at the Field of Remembrance in Westminster.

The group then listened to plainsong In the Nave and could imagine 12th century monastic monks singing. They were guided around the Abbey's history, stopping at various points including the Quire, the Altar (by which the Queen sat in last week's service) the famous Cosmati pavement, St Edward the Confessor's shrine (which is normally closed to visitors), Henry VII's chapel and Poets' Corner. It was a great privilege to see Westminster Abbey without a lot of other visitors being there, so that the special atmosphere could be appreciated.

Perhaps the most memorable part was outside Henry V's tomb where a chorister took the part of Henry V speaking before the Battle of Agincourt and said (in Shakespeare's words), "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers. But we in it shall be remember'd." This acted as a reminder of the centenary of 1918's armistice. Seconds later the choir appeared in the spectacular setting of King Henry VII's Lady Chapel, where the vibrant banners of the living Knights of the Order of Bath hang above the stalls. They sang the stirring Agincourt song, honouring the English bowmen who defeated the French 600 years ago.

It had been reported in the papers that morning that a painting by David Hockney had been sold for \$80 million, a record for a living artist. The guide was very pleased to compare this price to last month's newly installed Hockney designed (free) stained glass window to celebrate the 65th anniversary of the Queen's reign.

Appropriately, the finale of the tour came when the choir solemnly sang "The Long Day Closes" by Sir Arthur Sullivan (of Gilbert and Sullivan fame) and a bugler played the Last Post – as had been played in the 11 November Remembrance Service. The Abbey lights gradually dimmed and it was a very moving and poignant finish. On the coach back to Leatherhead there were comments such as "it was a privilege to be there". (The Arts Society had been able to organise the trip by making a reservation years in advance).

