

Norwich Weekend Experience (A personal review)

Since my first NACTSEW AGM & Conference weekend in 2009, when I enjoyed the hospitality of Chester Shrievalty, this event has always been one of the very first dates I add to my calendar. Each year has been a joy, usually with the bonus of visiting somewhere for the first time.

As always, my wife and I were fortunate to be able to book a few extra night's stay giving ourselves the opportunity to explore and to "get our bearings". It was our first visit to Norwich - our honeymoon in Norwich, Vermont doesn't count!

Starting with a little window shopping at Jarrolds, we then took a brief pause at the Cosy Club. With map-in-hand this brought an immediate offer of help from a passerby. The enthusiastic (and full) resume of Norwich from a resident of 30 years was enlightening and set the tone for what proved to be a very friendly stay at every turn.

It is clear to me that what links our Cities and Towns is a respect and good guardianship of our individual histories and heritage. This, no doubt, being the reason our predecessors made the key decision to retain the role of Sheriff in the early 1970s at the time of the Local Government Act 1972.

As we explored further there were more offers of help from volunteer guides, all very smart and a credit to the City in their blue 'bibs'. Aside from locating the many fine historic buildings, some of which we would study more closely later, we were impressed with the neat market square. This must be a tremendous boost for local entrepreneurs and also for residents looking for unusual items and a bargain.

On the Friday evening there was a 'buzzing' atmosphere at the 'Welcome Reception' in Norwich Castle. A chance to greet old friends and meet some new members for the first time. With speeches, including a warm welcome from the Sheriff of Norwich Dr Jan Sheldon, it was the perfect start to the weekend in the perfect venue.

For me the evening was not over as I had organised a meal for all those who had travelled from Gloucester, including our Sheriff. A short walk from Norwich Castle and we enjoyed an excellent meal with a lively atmosphere back at the Cosy Club!

The AGM gathering at the City Hall on Saturday morning was another chance for all to get together again and the current Sheriffs present introduced themselves.

The passion for NACTSEW from members was clear. I was grateful to our Treasurer, Jan Lugg, who stepped in at the last minute to take on the role of Secretary, keeping track of some robust and opposing views during debate. My report, together with minutes of the meeting can be found on our website.

However, there was time to socialise and enjoy lunch before the afternoon excursions which had been organised in detail by the Norwich Shrievalty Committee, led by Chris Higgins. What a wonderful variety of choice we had for how to spend the afternoon in Norwich. Whether your interest was a guided Museum visit, a guided tour of Norwich Cathedral, an open bus tour of the City or simply to spend free time exploring on your own, the choice was there.

For me it was easy to decide as the Dean of Norwich Cathedral, Dean Andrew (more formally The Very Revd Dr Andrew Braddock), had been Interim Dean at Gloucester Cathedral until November 2022. Dean Andrew is well-known to Gloucester Civics, and it was impossible to resist seeing him again and join his guided tour of his new surroundings.

The Saturday evening black tie dinner at Blackfriar's Hall was a glorious occasion in the perfect venue. Perfect in terms of historic setting and perfect in terms of venue size with more than 120 seated. We were 'watched over' by part of the largest collection of civic portraits in England, including past Sheriffs of Norwich.

We enjoyed the musical accompaniment from the harpist Lucinder Pennick-Yiasimi, the Toastmaster Bob Lloyd, with special guests Lady Dannett Lord Lieutenant of Norfolk and our after-dinner speaker Lord Dannett.

The standard of the food and prompt service at the dinner was extremely high, and many 'delegates' took the time to tell me they thought the same thing. This was another triumph for Chris Higgins and his organising Committee, which was the reason I asked them to stand and make themselves known. They were acknowledged with enthusiastic applause.

I can report that kind donations toward the Sheriff's charity appeal during the dinner amounted to £1,152.96 when taking into account cash and card donations, plus Gift Aid claimed. Thank you to all those who donated.

Sunday morning was the final opportunity for us to gather together for a service at St Peter Mancroft Church, followed immediately by light refreshments. The service was well-attended as always and it felt to me that people stayed chatting for as long as they possibly could, not wanting the weekend to end. I was keen to stay near the church door in order to chat with people as they were leaving. I was overwhelmed with the strong message that came across about how much everyone had enjoyed the weekend. Well done to Norwich.

For my wife and I the weekend was not over as we continued our stay in Norwich. I think the amount of shoe-leather we wore out touring the City exceeded all personal records. We took many, many happy memories away with us and one of the final memories was when we finally rested and enjoyed a cream tea at Jarrolds. Thank you, Norwich, for the memories.

If you have memories and pictures you wish to share then please send them to Xena Dion, who do her best to find space to add to the many already included for you to enjoy.

David Brown, Chair NACTSEW

November 2023