

The Annual Gathering in Belfast, 21st - 26th September 2022.

In view of the postponement of The Gathering not once but twice in the shadow of the pandemic, it was very special indeed to be sitting on the coach, driven by our good friend Barry and surrounded by like-minded folk. Knowing that the trip had been planned by Elizabeth with her imaginative and painstaking approach to detail was wonderful. There had been significant necessary changes, including our Hotel booking, but all would be well.

Our first stop was at the National Memorial Arboretum at Alrewas in Staffordshire. Time constraints meant this could just be a "taster", with a talk by a volunteer guide, and welcome refreshments, but we could sense the scale and dignity of the venture which is now, after twenty years or so, mature and established. To my delight we went on to Carnforth Station Heritage Centre, the preserved setting for the film "Brief Encounter". We bought tea in THE refreshment room, but no sign of Trevor Howard or Celia Johnson. Then on up the M6, with late afternoon light on the hills of the Lake District, and some few hundred sheep safely grazing within miles of stonewall. Beautiful.

Our overnight bed was at The County Hotel, Carlisle. The bedroom window overlooked the centre of the town, with a busy traffic intersection and some distinctive historical landmarks. The only city in Cumbria and steeped in history back to Roman times, Carlisle would have been worth a lingering stay. Just eight miles from the Scottish border, we were soon on our way through Dumfries and Galloway's glorious countryside to the Cairnryan ferry. There were some emotive road-signs, including Gretna and Locherbie to fuel imaginings. Onto the Stena Line boat we rattled, marvelling at its capacity to swallow cars, coaches and lorries on two decks, before we spread on foot around its facilities for the two-hour crossing to Ireland. Fortunately, the North Channel of the Irish Sea was like a millpond.

Inevitably my first view of Northern Ireland began with Belfast's docklands: containers, cranes, vessels and warehouses then plenty of industrial buildings, blocks of flats, and underpasses; then off to Lisburn, probably seven miles away. The gleaming Haslem Hotel which took the thirty or so of us in when the hotel in central Belfast had had to withdraw its service was quite recently converted from an Argos warehouse (? store). The square behind it was the pedestrianised version of what had been an open-air public swimming pool. Barry, our driver, was a rich source of information and learned a lot from the Hotel Manager. The bedroom was enormous and quiet, but bizarrely storage and hanging

space was minimal. Lovely staff, and live music in the bar some evenings was a great touch.

Friday morning found us whisked back in time to nineteenth century Ballycultra, to the Ulster Folk Museum, made authentic by the meticulous reconstruction of buildings and features in a big landscape. I began by visiting a labourer's terraced cottage in Tea Lane, where a costumed guide by a roaring living-room fire explained that here her nine children and her husband and herself had just two bedrooms and an outside toilet. Among the shops in Cluan Place I popped into a pub, a dispensary, a hardware shop and found behind the draper's shop a weaver setting up her warp ready for the next exquisite length of tweed. Her patience and skill were considerable and genuine. A hasty look into the Church of Ireland, the Northern Bank, the Bank Manager's House and of course the Ballycultra Tearoom, then time was up, with lots left unseen.

Our next delight was Mount Stewart House and Gardens. This had been restored over three recent years by the National Trust to look much as it had done in the 1950's. The Trust took it on in 1976. It had been the Irish home of Edith, Lady Londonderry, who lavished love and care on both house and garden (voted one of the world's top ten gardens) and died in 1959. Mairi, her youngest daughter, lived there until her death in 2009. After over 250 years the property will in future not be home to family members but cared for by the National Trust.

That evening we went to St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast, for one of two Services of Celebration which opened the Annual Gathering of Mothers' Union. Dedicated to our late Patron, Queen Elizabeth the second, the timing and poignancy were extraordinary. Welcoming, well-organised and, yes, joyful, the sense of oneness was encapsulated for me when a smiling clergyman in the crowd commented on my accent and the "Gloucester Diocese" badge. He was from Enniskillen and had a brother in Stroud! The Celebrant was the Bishop of Connor, and technology enabled absent dignitaries, including Rt Revd Dr Emma Ineson, MU Central Chaplain and our Worldwide President, Sheran Harper, to contribute to the Gathering and to the Service. For me, the warmth and unity of hundreds of MU members present was at the heart of the weekend.

The Gathering was held in the luxury of the Waterfront Hall, International Conference Centre. We were welcomed by MU CEO Bev Jullien, and to the Province of All Ireland by their leaders June Butler and Iris Suitor, who helpfully gave a few background facts about Ireland's MU - its size, geography and time-line. It began in 1876, eleven years after Mary Sumner began the movement. We were briefed on several inspiring

projects in the province. The theme "Transformation Now" ran through the afternoon, focussing on three aspects: ourselves, our communities, our local churches and Mothers' Union. We had videos on a large screen from Worldwide Trustees from each Zone, and glimpsed the depth and breadth of the what Mothers' Union tackles practically and spiritually.

The day ended with a superb concert. This was given by the Clare Consort, from Ballyclare, whose Musical Director, Sheelagh Greer, sang beautiful arias between the choir's contributions. Heavenly.

Sunday morning saw us off to the Giant's Causeway, a World Heritage Site, and a magnet for tourists. There are plenty of geological facts and mythological fancies surrounding this extraordinary feature, but I was content simply to enjoy being there and absorb the bracing atmosphere whilst watching my step! It is a stone's throw from Bushmills Distillery, the oldest distillery in Ireland, which to the disappointment of a few was closed. We were well placed to head off in that comfortable coach for a tour of the Antrim coast, passing through Cushendun, an historic village owned by the National Trust from which Scotland can be seen. Barry elected to take us up into one of the Glens, and chose Glenariff. Glorious scenery led to a perfect tea-room (who could possibly prefer a distillery?) The oat-cake I had was so good I boldly asked the proprietor for the recipe. But I have no real expectation of baking something as lovely.

Back at the Haslem Hotel we were given a room to hold a Service of Communion, presided over by the Rev. Rosemary Franklin. It was quite simply the best way to round off our trip.

Monday was all about going home, with no deviations from that long journey, apart from a couple of Motorway Service stops (Tebay and Lancaster) for essential needs, including the statutory rest period for our trusty driver. The sea was a little choppier on the return crossing, but I had promised myself I would experience the fresh air of the outside deck, where travellers would usually only go to smoke. I hung on to the rail in the murky spray for probably a minute, then gratefully returned to the bright saloon and my bottomless cup of automated tea, silently humming "Eternal Father, Strong to Save".

Barry and his coach dropped a number of us at Hucclecote towards 11.00pm, with our luggage augmented with lots and lots of carrier bags full of Irish souvenirs. My travelling companion beamed at me and said, "That, Heather, was out of this world." I couldn't have agreed more, and in no small part it was thanks to the brilliant team of Elizabeth and Barry, our facilitators who organised and drove.

Heather Lovett