

A classic view from the Thames



Windsor a winner by boat

A boat trip on the Thames gives **Norman Wright** a new perspective of the classic views of Windsor Castle

WITH GENTLE swirls and eddies, the waters of the River Thames slipped under the bow as we left behind the battlements and towers of Windsor Castle for an afternoon's cruising.

It was the most English of scenes as we headed upstream with the classic view of

the castle high above the river in our wake. On a lovely early autumn afternoon, the big houses with gardens leading down to the water slipped past, as well as landmarks like Windsor Racecourse, the Olympic rowing course at Dorney and the old Bray film studios.

The river here is so different from the tidal stretches through central London that we all know. This is much more *Tales of the Riverbank*, especially on a

lazy, sunny afternoon. After negotiating Bray locks we chugged up to the picturesque village, home to celebrities and Michelin-starred restaurants before making the return journey.

The Englishness of the cruise was heightened with a traditional afternoon tea taken in sunlight dappled by the leaves of the waterside trees.

We were on a coach tour to Windsor but swapped our luxury transport for an

equally comfortable French Brothers boat for the afternoon. Many coach companies combine the Thames cruise with their land itineraries, and French Brothers run various cruises from as far upstream as Marlow and Maidenhead down to Hampton Court. They have a flotilla of boats, including a Victorian steam boat.

The highlight of any visit to Windsor, of course, is the castle. There was quite a queue leading up to opening on Saturday morning, but considering everyone had to go through airport-style metal detectors and bag X-rays it was a good-natured wait of perhaps 15 minutes.

On the day we visited, the outdoor exhibition of pictures celebrating the Queen as our longest reigning monarch (covered earlier in *Choice*) was on giving visitors a little more access to the area across the wide lawns in front of the royal apartments which is not always available. This included the classic view through the arch and down the Long Walk to Windsor Great Park.

Lots has been written about the state apartments and St George's Chapel, so enjoy the magnificence of the interiors, but don't miss the views from outside, especially the one from the terrace down across the valley



Main picture and below, Savill Gardens

with Eton town and Eton College far below. Another memory to save is of guardsmen marching from their sentry box to the clicking of 100 cameras, the scene heightened by the immaculate surroundings.

The Great Park is on the itinerary of many coach breaks. Where once kings hunted deer in the forests there are now many walks, including the Long Walk with another classic view up to the castle.



A horse-drawn ride at Hampton Court

Clockwise: Formal garden at Hampton Court; Our guide in front of a copy of Holbein's famous Henry VIII portrait; Gilding the Tudor Rose at Hampton Court; Cruising at Bray; Guarding Windsor Castle; A French Bros river trip; Eton College



There are also three wonderful landscapes to visit: the formal Savill Garden and Valley Garden as well as Virginia Water.

Our trip included Savill Garden, created in the Thirties by Sir Eric Savill with the support of King George V.

The gardens are quite compact with easy walking on paths and not too much uphill. They have areas dedicated to spring, summer and autumn seasons and remain open all winter. There's plenty to see and enjoy outdoors and an excellent visitor

centre with restaurant, shop and plant sales in a visionary building with a swirling roof that fits into the surroundings.

The very different landscape of the vast, flat riverside meadow at Runnymede ended a full day. The site where King John signed the Magna Carta 800 years ago is managed by the National Trust so there is its trademark tea room at the Edwin Lutyens-designed gates. It is a good walk across the meadow so a cuppa and slice of cake came in handy.

As well as the riverside walks there are

three memorials to visit, which mean about a mile of walking from the car park. The Magna Carta memorial marks the signing. The Commonwealth Air Forces Memorial has the names of 20,456 men and women of the Allied air forces during the Second World War who have no known grave. The third memorial is Britain's tribute to the US President John F Kennedy who was assassinated in 1963.

Half-way across the meadow to the memorials is the new art installation

The Jurors by British artist Hew Locke. Twelve intricately worked bronze chairs stand together. Each chair incorporates symbols and imagery representing concepts of law and key moments in the struggle for freedom, rule of law and equal rights.

Hampton Court Palace was one of Henry VIII's favourite homes after he received it as a gift from its creator Cardinal Thomas Wolsey. The cardinal, it seems, was probably given little alternative to handing over his palace which he

began to develop 500 years ago. One of the advantages of being in a coach party is that usually you will get a guide. Ours was in Tudor outfit and took the role of a real courtier from that era.

She really added to the experience with comprehensive knowledge of the building and its contents as well as lots of insights into Tudor lifestyles, including the fashion details of her authentic costume.

We concentrated on the Tudor part of the palace, leaving the later baroque

extensions to another visit. Again, don't ignore the exterior; there are superb formal gardens to enjoy.

Other places in the area that feature in coach breaks include Eton College, racing at Ascot or Windsor courses and Clivedon House.

Usually you will get time for a spot of shopping, either in Windsor or – if you want some smaller and more unusual shops – walk down past the castle walls and over the footbridge to Eton High Street.



Clockwise from top left: Carriage ride on the Long Walk; Classic view of the Walk from the castle; The round tower and gardens; Windsor shopping; Savill Garden visitor centre

Passport to Windsor

Getting there

Windsor is a popular destination for coach tour operators all over the UK and most have trips in their 2016 brochures. To find an operator near you, log on to the website: (www.findacoachholiday.com).

Where to stay

Tour operators can use hotels around the area. In Windsor itself we sampled an excellent meal at the Castle Hotel - you could only get closer to the castle if you were a guest of the royal family. Tel: 01753 252800, website: (www.accorhotels.com).

Where to eat

If you have a few moments in Windsor for a snack or a coffee break, try the excellent Limes Café and Bakery in Market Street just behind the famous Guildhall. Website: (www.limesbakery.com).

Find out more

- Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead tourist website: (www.windsor.gov.uk)
- French Brothers boat tours: (www.frenchbrothers.co.uk)
- Windsor Castle: (www.royalcollection.org.uk)
- Savill Garden (www.windsorgreatpark.co.uk).

◀ This year will see many events to mark the Queen's 90th birthday.

A spectacular equestrian-themed party in Windsor Castle's Private Home Park is one of the nation's flagship events for the birthday celebrations. The four-night theatrical show will be a celebration of the Queen's life, her love of horses, her dedication to the Commonwealth and international affairs, and her deep involvement with the Royal Navy, Army and Royal Air Force. Held on May 12 to 15, it will be attended by members of the Royal Family each evening, with the Queen at the final event which will be broadcast live on TV. Over 90 minutes, the show will feature more than 1000 participants from around the world and over 500 horses.

From April 21, the castle will stage a

special exhibition *Fashioning a Reign: 90 Years of Style from The Queen's Wardrobe* to mark the birthday (*Choice*, December). Together with Buckingham Palace and the Palace of Holyroodhouse, this will be the largest exhibition of the Queen's wardrobe with 150 outfits showcased across the three residences.

At Windsor Castle, the exhibition will feature magnificent evening gowns and elegant day ensembles worn at official events, contrasted with fancy-dress costumes worn by the young Princess Elizabeth for wartime family pantomimes at the castle. Details on the website: (www.royalcollection.org.uk).

Coach companies will also be including many other special events that mark the royal birthday.