

Zenecans in Hay-on-Wye

Bob Noon

Our proposed gathering in 2020 was postponed due to Covid but we successfully met for our early autumn ritual from 14 -16 September 2021 at the Baskerville Hall Hotel, Clyro, near Hay-on-Wye. The weather was kind to us and we had nearly a full-house to explore the beautiful countryside of the Wye Valley.

Peter Thomas had used his local knowledge and discovered Baskerville Hall in a 'reconnaissance visit' in autumn 2019 – its fading glory was considered ideal to accommodate us in our own dotages. Peter, Chris Ursell and Mike South duly fixed the hotel for 2020, renegotiated for 2021, walked the walks, sorted out our dinners and local pubs, and engineered a couple of excellent events for the last day with great success – not easy during Welsh Covid restrictions.

Our hostelry, The Baskerville Hall Hotel, was built in 1839 by the Baskervilles, descendants of the Dukes of Normandy. It was previously known as Clyro Court. Arthur Conan Doyle was a Baskerville family friend and visitor who learned of the local legend of the hounds of the Baskervilles and was inspired to create his most famous Sherlock Holmes case - but at the request of his friends he set the story in Devon 'to ward off tourists'.

Baskerville Hall was sold by the family descendants in 1946 for use as a state school but later, in 1972, converted into a hotel and health farm. It fell into disrepair until the current owner, David Hodby, purchased and renovated the Hall. Over the years Baskerville Hall has been used for weddings, raves, camping, a night club and a hostel/hotel. It has an eclectic mix of avocado and burgundy bathroom suites.

In terms of personnel, we welcomed Steve Corfield to the group and lamented the resignation of Neil Niblock. Peter Northwood couldn't make it this year but we expect him in 2022. John Gray joined us as our first so-called 'social member' (this entails eating and drinking heartily without unnecessary exercise). John was very sociable.

A few of the group had already spent two days experiencing mixed walking weather as the 'early trekkers' but your correspondent wasn't one of them. The full group assembled on Tuesday lunchtime in the dining room and then were taken up hill in a convoy of cars in order 'to avoid a dangerous road walk' (it was uphill) and then comfortably descended back to the valley in bright sun, enjoying the views of the Wye Valley. The group fragmented into the various pubs in Hay (it is possible also that some bookshops were also explored but no such visits were reported) before we re-assembled in the Three Tuns for the usual raucous dinner and a moonlight well-oiled march back 1.8 miles to the hotel (it was uphill).

The main day, Wednesday, was reasonably ambitious. We scaled Hay Bluff in mist. It straddles the English/Welsh border. We took the slightly less steep route walking from the Hay Bluff car park to the Gospel Pass car park and then up the grass track to the top of the Bluff. By the time we had reached the top, the mist had cleared and we viewed the adjacent Lord Hereford's Knob (Twmpa in

Welsh but not nearly so poetic). An early lunch was taken by some of us and we gazed at the glorious Wye Valley and Hay in the distance. After a steep descent back to the car park, the short walkers left by car and the rest of us roughly followed Offa's Dyke down into Hay via the bracken-clad hillside and sheep meadows until we reached the town. We arrived quite early and were grateful that Mike had thoroughly researched the route so we never strayed off-course. That is until we reached Hay. By then the sun was hot - and beer, coffee shops, bookshops and pubs were checked out in fragmented groups before we returned to the hotel for our gala dinner and AGM. David Hodby gave us a pre-dinner talk about his own colourful history and how he came to own Baskerville Hall. Froggie then assumed his annual role as chief wine taster with customary aplomb - and blackberry notes. Most of us chose Welsh lamb for our main course; it would have been rude not to. Kevin E conducted an efficient AGM where we planned our trips for the next few years and welcomed Steve C to the group.

Thursday consisted of a farm visit to a potato farm and a cider tour/tasting. Both were chosen by Mike and Chris to interest the group given our agchem and fermentation interests! The farm, run by George Goring produces and stores potatoes for Walkers and Tyrrells. We had talks from George and his cousin Jack. The whole set-up was immaculate. We visited the empty store that awaited the current year's harvest and were told how they use mint oil for sprout suppression (long gone are the 'Fusarex' days) and ambient ventilation to manage store temperature. We also visited the fields and discussed their use of cover crops and concerns for soil management, with the recent introduction of Hereford beef cattle and sheep on, what was previously, an arable-only farm.

Gwatkin Cider is an award-winning cider producer based at Moorhampton Park Farm in Abbey Dore, within the Golden Valley. It is run by Dennis Gwatkin who is the epitome of a rustic cider producer with a foot long beard and dreadlocks. He demonstrated some Victorian kit for chopping and pressing apples and described the various forms of cider and perry that they make while surrounded by drunken wasps. Obviously we sampled a few products before enjoying a ploughman's lunch on his lawn, followed by an exceptionally popular apple crumble.

We departed having enjoyed a dry, sunny and warm three days around Hay. The Welsh border country had taken pity on us for once. The unusual accommodation, the walks, the dinners, the side shows and the scenery were all superb. It was good to renew our friendship after a difficult 18 months of Covid. Inevitably there wasn't much self-distancing once the beer and banter started flowing and even Alastair removed his PPE after the first day.

Next year, it's the Yorkshire Dales from 13 to 15 September 2022, with John Humphreys and Kevin Eddison as organisers.

Zenecans gather outside Baskerville Hall



Baskerville Hall



The view from Hay Bluff after the mist cleared



Taking a breather



Dennis Gwatkin – master cider maker

