

A Weekend with Wodehouse

The Society Explores Norfolk

May 24–28, 2012

On a picture-postcard Saturday in May, forty enthusiastic Wodehouseans, along with their host, Michael Meakin (centre front, in striped shirt), gather in front of the legendary Octagon for a picture taken by Michael's son Charles. Two more wave from atop the structure that Bertie Wooster and the Rt Hon. A. B. Filmer climbed to escape an angry swan. But no swans threatened us on this warm, sun-drenched, and quite magical day – the highlight of an unforgettable weekend for all who took part in the Society's explorations of Norfolk and its Wodehousean connections.

assured, but for good measure we had Norman Murphy to create the ideal itinerary and provide a wealth of historical background, and Tony Ring to keep us all thoroughly entertained on the coach.

The fun began on Thursday, 24 May, with a London Wodehouse Walk conducted by Norman. (Those who couldn't make the Thursday Walk could do it on Monday the 28th instead.) On Thursday evening, the Weekenders gathered at Champagne Charlie's, near the Embankment. There, in addition to drinks, we received our name badges, packets stuffed with information about the sites we were



The Society had previously enjoyed two week-long excursions (in 2001 and 2007) that explored Wodehouse's associations with London, Shropshire, Worcestershire, Gloucestershire, and Hampshire. This left only one county of any Wodehousean significance – Norfolk, once the Wodehouse family seat and home to Hunstanton Hall, which PGW visited often and portrayed in many stories. With Chairman Hilary Bruce (whose bright idea this was) in charge of the planning, the weekend's success was

going to see, and a very warm welcome from Edward Cazalet, who wished us a joyous weekend filled with sweetness and light. And thus it turned out to be – a rare pleasant and sunny weekend in what has turned out to be England's wettest year since records began.

But the weather wasn't the only delightful part of the experience, as the following pages will demonstrate. There were also a few surprises, one of them provided by the Weekenders themselves. The Wodehouse gods were surely smiling on us!

For more articles and pictures from the weekend, see the September 2012 issue of Wooster Sauce, pp.11–14.

May 25: Of Kimberleys and Cathedrals

by Ken Clevenger

Friday dawned another glorious day, and since Chairman Hilary Bruce had intimated pretty dire consequences if we were late, we all rolled up to the Thames Embankment on time. We were pleased to see Big Dave, our 2007 Week With Wodehouse driver, was ready again to drive our big coach through some awfully small gaps between sets of hedgerows and rock walls that the English call roads. On the coach, we were thirty-nine in number, young and old but all in youthful spirits, with the U.K., U.S., Netherlands, Australia, Japan, Russia, and Portugal represented.

After roll call, we set off into the frightful London traffic. Big Dave's problem! We relaxed and enjoyed listening to Jonathan Cecil's reading of 'Jeeves and the Impending Doom'. Then Tony Ring produced some marvellous Plum poems for volunteers to read. After this, other Weekenders read inventive vignettes about which Wodehouse child character was their favourite and why. Amara El Gammal, our youngest member, picked Joey Cooley from *Laughing Gas*, as did Gloria Nakamura of California. Betty and Tom Hooker picked the Little Nugget, Ogden Ford. John Looijestijn, a Netherlander now living in Portugal, favoured Algernon Aubrey Little, and Tony offered his own dark-horse candidate, George Threepwood, Lord Emsworth's grandson. Murray Hedgcock adjudicated and named Andrea Jacobsen and Bob Rains as winners with their choice of Gladys, Lord Emsworth's girl friend, and her brother Ern – fond of jem sandwiches, he was. Murray also added his own tribute to Plum, invoking the image of a heavenly sited Royal typewriter without any sticky keys, and never a faint ribbon, at which Plum now composed for all eternity. It all made for entertaining coach riding.

After an excellent lunch at the historic Green Dragon pub in Wymondham, we were perhaps extra jolly when we arrived at Kimberley Hall. This ancestral home of the Earls of Kimberley, head of the

Wodehouse family, is perfectly in keeping with the gracious image found in so much of Plum's writing about country houses. We were warmly received by the present owners: Robbie Buxton, his wife, and his delightful parents. From the plum-coloured wallpaper in the drawing room to the Bludleigh Court-like mounted and stuffed animals (there was even a puffed-up blowfish on a shelf), anyone could see Plum would have felt right at home at Kimberley Hall. But journalistic ethics requires us to admit that it is not clear he ever did visit the ancestral home. Had he done so, however, he could not have helped admiring the view over the west lawn, or the serviceable drainpipes and stout wisteria vines at hand if someone wanted to depart without much notice.

I never wanted to leave, but Norman Murphy, our principal tour guide, herded us onto the coach to visit nearby Kimberley Church. Norman wrote the sets of notes for each day's activities and, as a neat touch, Hilary Bruce's accompanying paper clip was in the shape of the Empress of Blandings.

The old Norman church – not N.T.P.M., TMWKAE, I mean the old Kimberley Church, with its memorials to various Wodehouses – was peaceful and lovely, an appropriate preface to our next stop, Norwich Cathedral. The Wodehouse family has strong connections to this Gothic wonder, and a beautiful stained-glass window and memorial wall celebrate one branch of the family's long history. Math may have been a bit tricky for these earlier Wodehouses, but their service to Britain and their local community in many capacities was very clear. The clarity was provided by Ian Alexander-Sinclair, who had done painstaking research into the memorial which he recounted to us in cultured and dulcet tones amid the tombs. Accompanied by an excellent Wodehouse family tree diagram, his wonderful explanation also described Plum's social status as a younger son of a younger son compelled to earn a living. It was highly enlightening, and Ian's contribution to the whole weekend was a true gift.

Norwich Cathedral is just across the way from the Maids Head Hotel, where we stayed. It was not the hotel's fault that Friday was the local Sixth Forms' school-leaving day, and young people in silly costumes enlivened the streets well into the night. But we Wodehouse Weekenders were lively enough ourselves. After a splendid dinner in the hotel, some of us strolled out to join the merriment at the oldest pub in Norwich, the Adam and Eve, just down the street – built, they say, to serve the Cathedral builders in about 1249.

Thus, a post-prandial beaker, more congenial fellowship and conversation, a short stroll back to the Maids Head, and then to bed.



Kimberley Hall (photo by Masha Lebedeva)

May 26: The Longest Day

by Arthur and Elizabeth Findlay

Not the assault on the Normandy beaches in 1944, but the Wodehousean invasion – making slightly less noise – of the peaceful Norfolk countryside.

We did not actually get to the north Norfolk coast, but historic Hunstanton Hall (or Sunny Hunny to the locals, who also call it Hunston) is near – but not on – the coastline. On the way there, we had more entertainment organised by Tony Ring. First was a competition of book jackets with the titles in foreign languages for which we had to guess the English title. Then we had another selection of Plum's poems read by some of our members. All this as we drove through Norfolk via Heacham, where the village sign commemorates the visit of Princess Pocahontas.

As the setting for *Money for Nothing* and other stories, Hunstanton Hall was the core of our weekend. PGW loved it; think of the well-known photograph of him in plus-fours before the fireplace in Hunstanton Hall looking every inch the squire. Norman Murphy tells us that the Wodehouses visited the Hall often in the 1920s, no fewer than six times in 1929, and he rented it for two months in 1933; it was as near to living in Blandings Castle that Wodehouse ever got.

At Hunstanton we were joined by some Norfolk-based Society members and welcomed by the estate's owner, Michael Le Strange Meakin. (Although the house (now converted into flats) had to be sold because of death duties, the family managed to keep the estate.) We paid our respects to the derelict pigsty where PGW made friends with the black pig in 1928 which inspired him to create the Empress. The irrepressible Tamaki Morimura just had to go into the pigsty. After this, we loitered happily by the Hall's moat (widened into a lake), unlike PGW, who sat here in a punt busily pecking away on his typewriter.

We then walked to the Octagon, built in 1610 by Hamon Le Strange to practise his viol away from the Hall and so maintain (restore?) domestic harmony. It had been cleared for our visit and could once again be used for practising musical instruments far away from sensitive ears. Just right for bagpipes!

Tamaki had declared she was going to climb it, emulating Bertie Wooster and the Rt Hon. A. B. Filmer in 'Jeeves and the Impending Doom', and no sooner had we arrived than she was climbing – but fell! Clearly it didn't hurt too much because she started to climb again, successfully this time, assisted by Frank Hammerle. So all we needed was an angry swan! We had a group photo at this sacred spot and mighty

impressive we look (see p.1) – every bit the quiet, studious literary society. And they say the camera does not lie.

We visited the parish church and admired the monuments to Christopher, Hamon, and Leonard Le Strange, who all fought at Agincourt (1415); and to the Hamon Le Strange, who not only built the Octagon but brought the news of the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603 to her successor, James VI of Scotland.



Hunstanton Hall and its 'Inigo Jones' gate (photo by Masha Lebedeva)

After our unforgettable walk round Hunstanton, where seemingly little had changed since PGW knew it, we were able to repay some of Michael Meakin's hospitality with a noisy lunch at the Lifeboat Inn in Thornham. Afterwards, on the coach to Blickling, Tony read us a message welcoming us to Norfolk. It was from Stephen Fry, who couldn't join us because he was working far away in Wellington, New Zealand.

Blickling Hall was the home of a direct ancestor of PGW, Mary Boleyn, who, although married, had two children by Henry VIII. (He later married her sister Anne.) The splendid staircase was recently reopened, and we admired the beautiful ceilings, especially in the long gallery, which has the finest collection of rare books in England. There is a most elegant state bedroom reflecting the fact that the present edifice was built by James I's Chief Justice, Sir Henry Hobart. We also admired the beautiful gardens with their striking topiary.

Then it was back to Norwich through the gentle undulating Norfolk countryside. At dinner that night, Lesley Tapson rose to thank Hilary Bruce for all her hard work in organising this splendid weekend and presented her with gifts to express our appreciation. Hilary received a standing ovation, and quite right, too.

Then two of our company sprang their surprise. Masha Lebedeva, hiding behind a beard, and Ken Clevenger gave us an impromptu reading of the classic scene in 'The Clicking of Cuthbert' when Vladimir Brusiloff spits himself of Sovietski and Nastikoff. Masha's rendering of Brusiloff's dialogue, in an authentic Russian accent, produced the second standing ovation of the evening.

And so to bed after a long and delightful day.

May 27: Sunday in Norfolk

by Barbara Jacobitti

The Queen may not have joined us for tea at Sandringham (one was, after all, a bit busy with one's Jubilee). But Mother Nature must surely be a Wodehouse fan, as she sent her best wishes in the form of perfect weather for our weekend, right down to the last moment of fond farewells on London's Embankment.

On Sunday morning, after tucking into the eggs and b., we drove to Castle Rising. Along the way, Tony Ring revealed the titles of the mystery foreign book-cover photos he had passed out the day before. These included Russian, Hungarian, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and Danish, confirming PGW's popularity around the world. Karen Shotting, who somehow managed to guess four of the titles, collected a CD of Wodehouse songs for her winning entry.

Another set of poems was read by volunteers, including Murray Hedgcock, who paused to thank Hilary Bruce, Norman Murphy, Tony, and the many others who helped organized the weekend. Tony then shared the history of the scandalous Maud Allan, who is said to have danced naked as Salome in 1908 at the Palace Theatre. Plum was 26 at the time and used the uproar to write a poem. All this was occasionally interrupted by our own uproar – shouts of “Pig-hoo-o-o-ey!” as we passed pig farms along the way.

At Castle Rising, the owner, Lord Howard, was there to greet us. He was also kind enough to hand out a bag of those clever recording devices that tell you what you are looking at if you tap the right number. Almost like having Jeeves at your side.

Oddly enough, our last site was where the recorded Wodehouse family story begins, as the 12th-century stronghold is where John Wodehouse was Constable in 1404. He later won a knighthood at Agincourt in 1415, and the rest, is, of course, Wodehouse history. The word ‘Agincourt’ appears on the family coat of arms.

The stone keep was built around 1140 by William D'Albini. While the roof is gone, its stone walls are intact and give the visitor a glimpse at what life was like then. Cosy, no, but at least safe. Queen Isabella, the mother of Edward III, lived there and was visited by her son on several occasions. The castle passed to the Howard family in 1544. Their flag was flying over the castle, one of the few locations where you see this

today, another being Buckingham Palace, where the royal standard flies only when the Queen is in residence.

As we left, some excitement erupted when a stout branch jumped out and grabbed the bus's wing mirror. We knew whom to call on! Tamaki Morimura and Frank Hammerle had shown us the day before how they could scramble up stone walls (even without being chased by a swan), so it was the work of a moment for them to clamber up the bus and disentangle the mirror. We agreed that Dave, our driver – who had received applause often during the weekend for his amazing ability to get the bus through gaps seemingly too small for it – was certainly not to blame.

Then it was lunch at the King's Head, Great Bircham, after which it was on to Sandringham. As Hilary pointed out, this was the only stop on the entire weekend where the proprietor was not there to meet us. Perhaps next time?

The estate of 7,000 acres was purchased in 1862 as a residence for the Prince and Princess of Wales (later Edward VII and Queen Alexandra), and the house is a private home for the present Queen and her family, who always spend Christmas there. Most of the rooms are in their original style, and the main saloon includes framed family photos, a table for jigsaw puzzles, and a TV hidden inside a cabinet. Some of us visited the gardens and car museum.

Then it was back to the coach, heading to London, with our last splendid Tony-planned entertainment. The scenario was that Bertie Wooster's ex-fiancées and other ladies were to propose marriage to him, each in her own way. Tamaki proposed as Heloise Pringle, Tim Richards as Madeline Bassett, and Sue Reece as Trixie Waterbury, while Karen Shotting pleaded on behalf of Pauline Stoker. Even funnier, if that were possible, we then heard from Elaine Ring as Cleopatterer (the imagination boggled), Carey Tynan proposed as Lady Georgiana (from the stories of Rhys Bowen), and Christine Hewitt argued on behalf of Elizabeth Bennet. Chris Reece, as the beleaguered Bertie, finally and reluctantly settled for Pauline. We think.

Before we knew it, we were back at the Embankment and saying our sad goodbyes, warmed by the memories of a perfect Weekend with Wodehouse.



Those clever enough to attend the Weekend in Norfolk are now proudly serving their crumpets on this memento plate. The tour's logo was designed by Jane-Ann Cameron.