

FoGA members pretend to be Gloucester rugby players

On Sunday 25 June members of the Friends and their guests waited at the roadside for the coach that would take them on their annual mystery tour. The coach came into sight, but it was not what they expected. This was no ordinary coach but one painted in Gloucester Rugby's livery and emblazoned with their logo, the luxury vehicle used to transport the famous Cherry and Whites to away games. Here was a treat even as the tour started.

At various stopping points onlookers spotted the coach. They watched and waited for big burly rugby players to descend, perhaps hoping for an autograph, but showed some surprise when a group consisting mainly of senior citizens clambered slowly down the steps.

The coach headed to south Wales where the first stop was Caerwent, a town founded by the Romans and built to much the same design as Gloucester. Whereas Roman Gloucester has been built over by countless generations, the remains buried under later buildings, in Caerwent the foundations of Roman buildings are clearly visible, houses, shops, the forum and even a basilica.

The second stop was Cowbridge (with more surprised onlookers when the coach arrived) where the Friends enjoyed lunch in cafes and pubs but also explored the medieval layout of the town, discovered a wonderful physic garden, and enjoyed seeing a variety of delightful town houses.

The last stop was Llantwit Major. The object of the visit was to explore the magnificent church dedicated to St Illtud, but a short wait was necessary as a wedding was taking place. Fortunately, one of the local pubs was holding a beer festival, which kept some members pleasantly entertained. The church itself is a breathtaking edifice, perhaps as long as the nave and quire of Gloucester Cathedral. In effect it is three churches of different eras joined together in one glorious building, with intriguing wall paintings and monuments. It sits on the site of a monastic school founded by Illtud about 500 AD and claims to be Britain's oldest seat of learning. A once derelict galilee chapel, recently restored, houses an impressive collection of large inscribed Celtic stones, the earliest dating from the 9th Century.

A Roman town, a physic garden and a church which played a part in the development of Welsh Christianity – all these were within easy distance of Gloucestershire yet virtually no one on the tour had ever been to them before. Our thanks go to Dr John Chandler who organised the tour and introduced them to members. John's research and meticulous planning provided the Friends with a most memorable, and enjoyable, mystery tour.