

A MAGICAL GERMAN VISIT 27 SEPTEMBER – 3 OCTOBER 2012

Once upon a time a couple called Frances and John Fogelman lived in the north-western corner of Germany in North Rhine-Westphalia. Whilst there, they made some exceptionally good friends called Helgard and Ulrich Weiß. A fairytale holiday for some fortunate West Essex Ramblers evolved from this friendship.

Helgard and Ulrich came to visit their friends in England and joined West Essex Ramblers for some of our walks. They wanted to return the favour and invited a party of our ramblers to join them on their home soil. The first lucky 24 applicants were well rewarded.

Our magic carpet ride to Germany was made on a Swallow's bus (what else!) via the Channel Tunnel. All went smoothly thanks to our excellent driver, Tony, and we soon landed at the very comfortable hotel, Gasthof Prigge on the outskirts of Lengerich. That evening we were supplied with plentiful portions of excellent local cuisine, including pumpkin soup, which had some of us running to the local market to buy the appropriate ingredients to enjoy at home.

Almost every moment of our German experience was filled. Helgard and Ulrich had arranged interesting trips to the picturesque town of Tecklenburg and the attractive cities of Osnabrück and Münster; some lovely walks in their not too hilly countryside were also on the agenda. We walked part of the long distance path, the Hermann's Weg and were rewarded with beautiful views, a variety of old mills and moated mansions, lovely architecture, including traditional black and white buildings. All this was accompanied by wonderful German cakes, washed down with lashings of beer, wine and schnapps. Lecker (very tasty) was the word of the week.

Not only did we have the attentive services of Helgard and Ulrich during the week (who even invited us all back to their lovely home for an impromptu visit and drinks), but also many of their friends helped by giving us inside information about the area. We must thank Martin Zeitz, Stella Rank-Berry, Anne Wallkötter, Ernst Hüttemann and Rainer Weißenborn for their excellent local knowledge and skill as guides.

On the Sunday, as part of a varied walk, we visited the interesting old convent at Gravenhorst. There was also the opportunity to view a modern art exhibition and an old mill. We had a pleasant pause there for more Kaffee and Kuchen, with some members of the group sampling the local Zwiebelkuchen (onion tart).

At Kalkriese, we visited an old battleground where, in the 9th century AD, ill-equipped Germanic tribes were able to slaughter 3 legions of Roman soldiers. We had an entertaining guided tour of the Varus Battle museum, which commemorates the victory and is located on one of the most important archaeological sites in Europe.

Another day we were joined by the local walking group for an enjoyable tour of Lengerich and a visit to an old tunnel used by the Nazis in World War II. They used forced labour to make aircraft parts. When the British arrived in 1945, they found the local inhabitants sheltering there. In order that passers-by are able to learn about the use of the tunnel during this period, history staff and students from the University of Münster posted details on the wall outside and we were privileged to witness this ceremony. John Fogelman gave us a most impressive translation of speeches given to us in German by both staff and students. We were astonished at the way he not only translated the long speeches, but also managed to remember the content. Well done, John! After this sobering interlude, we were entertained at the town's Heimathaus (the group's base) in a wonderful old building. We were served with extraordinary cakes, which were baked by ladies in the group and Weggenbrot (a local fruit bread). This glorious excess was washed down by tea, coffee and

schnapps. Lecker!

One evening, we were entertained by a local choir, led by Susanne Drerup-Christenhues, who valiantly tried to teach us German folk songs. The end effect was rather good, even though we say so ourselves. On the final evening Frances and John arranged a quiz. German friends were invited and mixed English and German teams were formed. The Germans were a little puzzled. They don't have such informal quiz evenings, so we told them not to take it too seriously. Frances handled the whole proceedings with great determination and lots of shouting until she lost her voice and John had to take over for a short while. All went swimmingly well and prizes were supplied to all.

All too soon, it was time to return in our magic pumpkin (I mean bus!) and we had to leave behind some very good new friends. A huge thank you to Frances, John, Helgard and Ulrich for making this all possible. Their wonderful organisation was very much appreciated. They had thought of everything to make a magical experience for us all!

Jan Latham