

We approached the start of our three-day Last Carriage Club trip unsure if our train would be affected by the long-running train strikes. Fortunately, we were saved by our gracious long-lived Queen. Her timely death saturated the news and forced strike action to be abandoned for the time being.

We travelled by train and tram to the door to the Lucky Hotel in Newcastle. Then we did our own thing until we boarded the *Princess* for a night tour and dinner on Newcastle Harbour. The abundant meal was supported by a solo guitar player and extravagant dancing by some.

The next morning, we boarded another chartered boat, *Bay Connections*, for the three-hour cruise along the Hunter River to Morpeth. This voyage was new to us all and the river proved to be extremely interesting and visually pleasant. We even had the 1952 Hexham Bridge raised to allow our vessel's mast pass under its roadway. Along the way we were consistently plied with refreshments that rather interfered with our ability to consume even a small lunch when we reached Morpeth. My attempt for some lunch saw me falling into the bakery face first and being raised by a group of possibly concerned bystanders. I did win though. The bakery gave me a free pie with two sauces.

After some time looking around the delights of the heritage-rich 1821 town of Morpeth, our coach took us to our next hotel in Maitland. This was the Mercure Monte Pio Hotel, built in 1870 as an orphanage and later converted to a nunnery and convent. I doubt that anyone actually saw the ghost of the old Nun who, according to legend, wanders the corridors at night searching for tea. It is now a beautifully preserved hotel and conference centre, set upon park-like grounds.

To avoid carrying our baggage on the boat, its transport between the Newcastle and Morpeth hotels had been arranged with a carrier. They did complete the job but not before the young ladies in the Lucky Hotel spent most of the day sitting on top of our bags filling their tiny office, whilst frantically making phone calls to us to urge the carrier to hurry up.

The evening meal at the Monte Pio was the most fun possible, even though it emerged from what was really a hotelier's nightmare. The hotel manager knew that we were a group of forty-four people who would be having our evening meal in the lavish dining room. At the appropriate time we sat at a long table with twenty-two of us on each side. We had dutifully ordered our meals in advance (without knowing why) to make preparation easier. We waited and waited (although a few drinks helped with the delay) not realising there was something else we did not know.

There was no-one to bring our meals that were presumably being prepared in the kitchen!

The receptionist, in addition to her usual job, was running around like a fly in a bottle, tending to the bar, delivering meals to rooms and everything else she could do – but still no meals for us. At last, the hotel manager, perhaps now unkindly referred to as Basil Fawty, appeared in the bar tearing his hair out with frustration. We realised that even Manuel was not around.

Then, our lively new member, Lee Delaney sprang to action, went to the kitchen, and started collecting meals to bring to the table, despite the manager's protest that this was not a normal thing to happen. Two nurses from Tamworth, sitting at another table, watched all this with considerable amusement and followed Lee's lead, making three waitresses rapidly serving meals to us.

I could not have arranged better entertainment had I engaged comedians for the dinner.

When I later thanked the nurses, one said, "*That's all right, we are midwives. We are used to delivering at short notice.*"

Early the following morning the receptionist, and only the receptionist, had been brought in early to provide our Continental breakfast. Had she slept there after doing the washing up in the kitchen, I thought? However, Basil himself was on hand with the bill as I tried to sneak out the front door of what was now described by all of us as *Fawty Towers*.

Many of us then visited Maitland Gaol, opened in 1848 and closed in 1998. A tour was available, conducted by Ron Smith walking by a Blue Tooth presentation on a speaker. The remainder of us had gone to the Green Hills Shopping Centre where we would all meet for lunch.

Our Thai Banquet lunch at the Kinn Thai Restaurant proved to be excellent. We had our own section of the restaurant, and the meal was delicious and more than adequate.

Following this, our coach arrived to deliver us at the station for the train ride home.

I believe that the trip was very much enjoyed by all.

*Graham Wilcox*