

KIRMINGTON-TERBREGGE TWINNING VISIT 1ST-3RD MAY 2015

The prospect of being tour guide for 30 people was really quite daunting. Having been on group visits before I was convinced that someone would not turn up, or they would at least be late on the day of travel. I need not have worried as everybody arrived at Humberside Airport before the 5.10 a.m. deadline and went through security without a hitch. Well, except Frank who had forgotten to take his corkscrew out of his hand luggage....there's always one!!

This was Friday the 1st May and it was the combination of many months of planning which had commenced in September 2014 with a meeting with Hans Onderwater, the Dutch inspiration behind the celebrations of the 70th Anniversary of Operation Manna.

Now after all that time here we were, everybody who had said they would like to come was there. Not a single person dropped out. A truly remarkable achievement by the Kirmington Gang!! We were also privileged to have Toby Dennis, the Lord Lieutenant of Lincolnshire and his wife Sarah joining us for the trip.

The flight to Holland, kindly organised by Humberside Airport was great. No sooner had we reached cruising altitude then we were descending into Schipol Airport. 50 minutes after take off we arrived, lost a few people in arrivals but happily we all met up again to board the coach for our first stop at the Keukenhof Gardens. Craig was delayed because the authorities thought he had kidnapped Leyla but a quick phone call to Mum solved this.

The Keukenhof Gardens are a unique attraction about 45 minutes from the airport and is the largest bulb field in the world. It has been turned into a visitor attraction and we were able to spend a few hours wandering around in the May spring sunshine.

On arrival at our hotel we met with our Dutch Hosts, Franz Shuite, Tommie Jahse and Jaco de Hoog. A few drinks later we were soon the best of friends!

On the first evening we all met in a restaurant at the Dutch airfield Waalhaven where we participated in the official twinning ceremony. There, with great pride we exchanged gifts and signed the Twinning Certificates. We were also given a wonderful original oil painting of the Manna food drops and these will be placed in the Church in Kirmington near the Squadron window for all to see.

Saturday dawned bright and sunny which was fortunate as the days events would all be outside. We were transported to Neiw Terbregge, the place where our own 166 squadron had dropped food parcels on 2nd May 1945 at the location of a modern memorial dedicated to the brave air crews who participated in Operation Manna.

After refreshments we attended the memorial service which was carried out with the greatest dignity. There were two high-lights for me, the first being the flypast of the BBMF Lancaster in formation with the Dutch Spitfire. The second was when the nine veterans, all in their 90's now, stood to salute the memorial. They struggled to stand some of them but comrades once again they all helped each other to give a very moving salute. Their efforts were rewarded with a spontaneous round of applause from the crowd which included families who benefited from the food drops, air forces from UK, USA, Canada and Australia who were involved in Manna and Chow Hound and obviously our little group from Kirmington supporting 166 Squadron!!

The afternoon concluded with a reception at the Aegir Yacht Club in Rotterdam. We joined the veterans, our Dutch hosts and all the dignitaries who had been at the memorial service to spend a few hours chatting and enjoying the beautiful sun shine and surroundings.

On the Saturday evening the Lord Lieutenant, Chair of Parish Council and Mike Galvin representing the RAF National Service Association attended an official function at the Marine Barracks in Rotterdam. The remainder of the Kirmington Gang were treated to a lovely meal at the hotel with some of our Dutch hosts present where we were able to thank them officially for their generous hospitality and to invite them back to Kirmington. Each of us received a print of the painting, a food parcel, similar to what the Dutch would have received in 1945 and a booklet about the Manna Food drops.

Sunday dawned, by way of contrast, as a cool and wet day. This was not a problem as our last visit was a guided boat trip around Rotterdam Harbour which was a fascinating insight into the worlds biggest port.

All too soon it was time to leave. After an emotional farewell from our hosts we set off for the airport in the pouring rain and in no time we were safely back to dear old Humberside Airport!

Personally, I felt honoured to be a part of this venture. Many Kirmington residents felt strongly about representing 166 squadron at this very special memorial event and individually went to great expenses to be there. We could not have done it without the help of a number of local sponsors but particularly not without Humberside Airport who really did give something back to our community.

These trips do not happen by magic and there are lots of people to thank, however, special thanks must be given to Bert and Julie Welman both of whom overcame serious illness to be there. Bert put in a huge amount of effort to organise visits and transport to ensure everyone had a great time.

I think that all of those who attended should feel a sense of pride that they committed to this event and represented their community with great style and respect. Well done all!

We have invited our Dutch Friends to join us for the 166 memorial service on 5th September and we are planning to host a return visit from the 4th - 6th September 2015. I sincerely hope that Kirmington residents get behind the visit and help us repay this marvellous friendship and hospitality that we received.

Finally why “The Kirmington Gang”?? Hans Onderwater coined this phrase early in our communications. I think it is something to do with translation but quite simply I think it sums the group up quite well!

Richard Hannigan