

Delving into the Past



By Mike Trippitt

THE NATIONAL MARITIME, Greenwich; The National Railway, York; The National Science and Media, Bradford; The National Motor, Beaulieu; The National Football, Manchester.

The chances are someone in every household will have visited one of these renowned museums in recent years. Perhaps it's the word 'National' that guarantees we'll have a fascinating day to remember, or their geographical location that reinforces just how significant these places are, or maybe just the marketing that makes us feel more culturally worthy for having made the trek to these great institutions.

In September, armed with my campervan, a folding bike, a pair of boots and clothing fit for every conceivable meteorological eventuality I ventured to the dizzy uplands of ... St Neots. Yes, St Neots, all of 25 minutes away. I became giddy with travel fatigue, as I crossed continents to far-flung places like ... Huntingdon, St Ives and Ely.

Now I grant you, my article for a campervan magazine is not a travel epic of Chatwin or Bryson proportions, but to misquote the great Basil Fawlty: "What were you expecting to see in St Ives? The Hanging Gardens of Babylon?"

I certainly wasn't expecting, during my four days in the Ouse Valley, to learn so much about local history, or to see and touch so much of its modern and ancient past.

In St Neots, museum curator Liz Davies told me more of St Neots Museum's former life as a police station and court. I learned that on the night of the 1871 census one person languished in what was then presumably the town lock-up.

In St Ives, I met with museum assistant Richard Carter, who explained the history of the chapel on the bridge. I was enthralled to hear that for a time it was a disreputable alehouse. It even had pigs living in the cellar.

In Huntingdon I found out more about Cromwell's birth and time in the town, and in Ely (that boasts two museums and a cathedral) I met

Mike Trippitt is a freelance writer living in St Ives. His blog is at www.miketrippitt.com and you can follow him on Facebook.

with cathedral guide David Mynott, who passed on some of his vast knowledge.

I discovered there is no undercroft, and I was astonished to find that its foundations are just six feet deep. No wonder the central tower came crashing down in 1322 when the monks were building a new Lady Chapel.

And all this cost me very little; not the arm and a leg of entry to a 'National'. And I didn't spend hours on end getting there, cramped into an overcrowded train, held up in some tiresome roadworks, or worse, exchanging bugs and germs with the disgruntled on the London Underground.


In St Neots Museum, The Cromwell Museum, The Norris Museum, Ely Cathedral and Stained Glass Museum, and Ely Museum we have a wealth of local history, fascinating artifacts and informed people willing to share great stories right here on our doorstep.

That certainly beats the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

Mindbenders

Can you find the hidden phrases?

C#AIRS

TUNNEL 

canlongine