

Music Tour to Belgium – July 2014

After a year's worth of preparation, months of anticipation and a week of last minute rehearsals, the 22nd of July had arrived. The weather was unusually warm that day, promise of the great weather to come. After bidding Woodford farewell for another year, and meeting our tour manager, Abby, we began the laborious task of loading the coach, with an endless chain of suitcases and instruments of all shapes and sizes.

Our first full day began with an unusually tuneful rendition of happy birthday (harmonies included). And what better way to follow breakfast than visiting a chocolate factory in Bruges? We gladly welcomed the heavenly smell, learning about chocolate making, sampling the wares and remaining studiously oblivious to the 'no photography' sign. The group then enjoyed a relaxing canal cruise, looking for the celebrated 'doggy in the window' and noting at the contrast between our London scenery and the Belgian houses along the canal.

Our first concert took place at Wapenplein Bandstand, Ostend. It was much like our summer showcase: folders were handed out, and no matter how many wooden pegs we used, one stray sheet of music went flying! We enjoyed our up market busking and we hope the passers by did too. But, Ostend seemed to be pleased, and we were rewarded with free drinks at the bandstand.

Our evening activity was bowling. While most of us finished quite quickly, others chose to take their time. Miss Hasler and Mrs Thompson, though being amongst the lowest scorers, definitely won, with their creative, music themed bowling run ups - a rather difficult concept to explain.

The next morning, we left early for the Bellewaerde Theme Park. We were all set on a fun few hours of screaming our hearts out and getting soaked on the biggest rides possible, while still finding time to try the smaller rides; the orchestra tried very hard to sing their parts to *Pirates of the Caribbean* on the pirate ship ride. A definite favourite was the water slide, as we watched our sixth formers race to the bottom against Miss Hasler and Miss Irwin. The sixth formers lost.

Then the group were off again, to perform in the 'Gent Fest,' a prestigious music festival for which we had auditioned earlier in the year. This was very different to what many of us were used to, as we had the opportunity to perform on a professional stage with sound checks in front of a venue that sat a thousand. Many seemed to like our performance, especially those who'd been celebrating perhaps a little early in the day.

The next day was sadly the last of our Music Tour. While some were packed by 7:00 in the morning, others took their time to tidy their rooms. But, we left in time to make our last visit, the Memorial Museum in Passendale. This visit made a huge impression on us, particularly in the year marking the centenary of the start of WWI. We walked through damp and dingy trenches, donned heavy military uniforms and watched jittery black and white footage of life on the front line.

But, there's no place like home, and what better way to return to England than in the pouring rain? After Miss Hasler, Miss Irwin and Miss Harrigan bravely walked out into the road with flip flops and umbrellas, to stop the oncoming traffic so the coach could park in the driveway, we began our endless chain of luggage again, desperate to be home and dry.

The first Music Tour was an absolute success: it was a trip of new friendships, new musical experiences, and, most importantly, plenty of late night card games. We all had a lot of fun, but there were a lot of important things we learnt. Going on tour has taught us to work better as a team and given us valuable experience in dealing with nerves and more professional performances. We were also able to experience a different culture and learn more about the world's history. And of course, we have learnt so much musically and have grown as an ensemble. The music tour helped our musicianship and friendships in a way that practising in a classroom can't. For that we are so grateful for the music department, both teachers and students, and we hope that there'll be more exciting music tours to come.

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