

# Holt WI

As I write this, Holt ladies are preparing for their summer break, whilst being aware that our report will be published in the September magazine. We have had a surprisingly full first six months, considering that our continued existence hung in the balance at the turn of the year. Volunteer drivers and determination have kept the outings going. Volunteer hostesses have helped raise funds with coffee mornings and an open meeting. Volunteer furniture movers and general dogsbodies have kept the whole show on the road. So now in the summer months, we are confident that we may be fewer in numbers, but Holt WI is still doing well. There is no monthly meeting in August, but we do have a theatre visit to the Swan and a visit to Bonterre Farm project at Top Barn, for another afternoon of flowers, scones and home-made jam. It was lavender and scones last year plus a fascinating talk about the project and tour round the grounds.

Breaking with tradition, we are moving President's Evening to September this year and therefore enjoyed a speaker at July's meeting. David Barrie came armed with a talk called "By Steam to Darjeeling", undaunted by the prospect of interesting a group of mature ladies in steam trains. Many of us remember the Eagle magazine, which apparently stirred David's love of steam trains, but not many of us would have welcomed a "footplate experience" as a fiftieth birthday present. However, the story that David unfolded about the UNESCO world heritage Darjeeling Himalayan Steam train was fascinating. Darjeeling is sandwiched between Bhutan and Nepal and the railway is a narrow gauge track that basically ascends the Himalayas. Through a series of spirals and zigzags, the little train achieves this amazing climb at 11mph on the way up, and 9 mph on the way down. For a maximum total of fifty passengers, the train needs a crew of at least ten, including one man to break up the coal into reasonable sized pieces to feed the furnace and two men to jump up and down on the brakes to activate them! Sand is used on the rails to improve grip and the passengers have to help out in bucket chains if the water tanks have been siphoned dry by local villagers.



Leaving behind the city's exotic smells of spices, wood smoke, dung and diesel fumes, passengers are treated to the most breath-taking views down the mountain sides and across the valleys to the Himalayan peaks. The railway, once nearly closed by Indian Railways, but reborn as a Heritage tourist destination thanks to train enthusiasts, is now regularly bedecked with marigold garlands and takes the visitor through the main street of towns on its route up to the cooler destination of Darjeeling. Here the superior

Windermere Hotel serves cucumber sandwiches (with the crusts cut off) in Daisy's Music Room. The culture here is far closer to that of Tibet than of Hindu India, as the visitor is surrounded by Buddhist prayer flags and the monasteries built by monks who fled the Chinese invasion of Tibet. So the journey of 55 miles, which can easily take nine hours, is as much a journey through social and religious changes as it is the changes in the landscape. Traditionally, during the days of the Raj, Darjeeling was a place for Europeans to retreat from the intense heat of the plain to the cooler, fresher mountain air and of course to sip Darjeeling tea, noted by David to be the nectar of all teas.



With tourism has come some benefits. Yes, the Empire was of its time and India's independence was imperative, but, as David noted, the view of the British now is that we have changed from being the wicked step-father to the favourite uncle. We left behind the railways, a common language and, perhaps less positively, bureaucracy. Now, a million British visitors a year bring money into the Indian economy. British enthusiasts started the society that saved the Darjeeling railway and founded a charity which raises money to bring health care and some peripatetic schooling to the remote villages on its route. So this little train, built in 1880, which celebrates Tenzing Norgai, in the carriage named after him, continues to labour up the slopes into the fresh mountain air and provide an adventure for the Western visitor. If you want to sit on the roof of the train, that is fine because there are no Health and Safety laws to stop you, but be sure you sit on the right carriage because the roofs are as subject to first and second class as are the interiors!

Holt WI welcomes new joiners at any time. Our next meeting in the Village Hall will be on the first Thursday in October at 7 pm. Why not pop along as a visitor and try it out?