

Great joy as visits are back!

Thursday July 7th was a momentous day for the Friends of Alzey; we were able to welcome 17 visitors who, undaunted by travel chaos and covid fears, made it over to Harpenden for the vital resumption of face to face visits between residents of our towns. We last saw each other in person in September 2019, so the Welcome Garden Party with Pimms and bunting felt magical; it heralded three days of smiles, laughter and chatter, local activities, relaxation together and plenty of eating and drinking, all bathed in glorious sunshine.

On Friday July 8th we gathered in Rothamsted Park for the planting of an oak tree as part of the Queen's Green Canopy to mark our towns' twinning for almost 60 years, then showed our visitors the sporting facilities available around the Park. Our Town Mayor Councillor Lisa Scriven formally welcomed the Friends of Harpenden and the Mayoral delegation from Alzey at a Reception in Park Hall. Mayor Christoph Burkhard is a familiar figure in Harpenden; in this his final year as Mayor, he was accompanied by his family and Alzey's Wine Queen Julia I and her fiancé.

The day continued with an expert guided tour of some field experiments at Rothamsted Research and of the gardens at the Manor. These were a foretaste of the afternoon when we visited the house and gardens of St Paul's Waldenbury. It was a special bonus to be guided by Caroline and Simon Bowes-Lyon; the Royal Family is generally held in great affection by the people of Alzey, so the time there was much appreciated in the year of Queen Elizabeth's Platinum Jubilee. Our outing was rounded off perfectly with tea and scones at Emily's teashop in Whitwell.

Saturday July 9th was a free day to spend with hosts then, in the morning shade of Sunday July 10th, the visitors were shown Batford Springs Nature Reserve and the new board walk. The Highland Gathering in Rothamsted Park provided afternoon entertainment for those who wanted it. The Mayoral Delegation was hosted for lunch by the President of the Lions Club; Christoph Burkhard later gamely entered the haggis throwing event, with moral support coming from the Wine Queen at the ringside who drew admiring glances for her beautiful tiara and official outfit.

The evening Farewell Dinner at Redbourn Golf Club rounded off the visit in a atmosphere of immense positivity about the partnership between the two towns. Gabriele Müller-Gebhardt, Chair of the Friends of Harpenden, thanked the hosts for their wonderful hospitality and spoke of the visitors' delight with the programme of activities. Chair of the Friends of Alzey, Susan Vinther, thanked the committee members who had worked so hard planning the visit, and asked the assembled guests for ideas as to how their positive momentum can best be carried forward into future generations. Then came the formalities; Mayor Burkhard presented Harpenden's Mayor with a large aerial photograph of Alzey and bestowed awards upon long-serving members of the committee of the Friends of Alzey for their commitment to town twinning. He also presented a special award to Mrs Brown, Head of German at Sir John Lawes School, for organising pupil exchange visits with the Elisabeth-Langgässer-Gymnasium for twenty years. Mayor Lisa Scriven presented awards for service to town twinning to committee members of the Friends of Harpenden as well as to Mayor Burkhard. Many photographs were taken as the recipients of awards and the guests mingled on the terrace at the end of the evening, reluctant to round conversations off and leave such a convivial event in order to prepare for their return to Germany the following day.

The hosts and visitors parted on Monday July 11th already looking forward to seeing each other again in 2023 for the celebration of 60 years of official partnership and for the chance to bring new people along on the special journey that is town twinning!

Planting of a young oak tree in Rothamsted Park July 8th 2022

