Lovely Leiden never disappoints

Club member Dawn Macfarlane weaved her way round the well-known and not-so-well known haunts of Leiden to show fellow members the best of the city. JANET O'CONNELL reports.

Members from the British Club took a relaxing and informative walk around one of the most picturesque places in the Netherlands. Dawn Macfarlane led the guided walk and showed us plenty of sights, old and new, some known, some hidden away while we heard about the history of Leiden and its inhabitants. So often we only see what's in front of us at eye-level, but Dawn told us to look up to the skies - the architecture gave us a beautiful individual range of gables and rooflines. Some of the houses leant outwards or to one side, while others were adorned with stepped gable ends and brickwork. Some even had poems illustrating them.

We started our walk by the station - this is a very modern building and contrasts markedly to the buildings we were to see later.We strolled through the cattle market. The cattle market had been held on this site since 1616; initially, mainly cattle were traded, but later sheep became the largest commodity. The market moved to a special hall in 1969 and eventually stopped in 2001. A bell was always rung to signal the start of trading; it was built in 1734, nestling between two houses. It was restored to its original position in 2008.

Our journey took us next to the Morspoort. It was constructed in 1669 on the site of an earlier wooden structure. Carrying on past the windmill De Put, we admired the lovely bridge to Rembrandtplaats - a small plaque on the wall of the modern building marks his birthplace along with a sculpture in the square. From the bridge, we saw the first of the wall poems on our walk. It was to become a regular feature, with many of the poems in different languages. My favourite, I think, was in the courtyard of the Hortus Botanicus, where we stopped for a welcome coffee and a sit-down in the gorgeous surroundings. I have no idea what the poem said, but it was very pretty.

At the end of the fifteenth century, Leiden was one of the largest cities in Holland. During the Reformation in the sixteenth century, Protestant denominations were being persecuted by the Spanish Catholic rule. In 1572, Leiden joined the Dutch revolt against the Spanish rule and was besieged by the Spaniards. The siege finally ended in 1574 and the Spanish troops withdrew. Every year the Relief of Leiden is celebrated on 3 October. In 1575 Leiden University was founded, the first university of the northern Netherlands, and it became one of the leading universities in Europe.

During the tour, we took in different parts of the University of Leiden, including the Arsenaal, the Academie, the Hortus Botanicus, the Observatories, along with the Kamerlingh Onnes building, once part of the physics laboratories, but now the law faculty. Dawn guided us to a little spot by the side of a canal and showed us a plaque in the ground. Here was the spot where the Pilgrim Fathers, who had settled in Leiden at the beginning of the seventeenth century, had departed for America. In 1609, a group of English religious refugees arrived in Leiden; they became known as the Pilgrims. By 1620, there were around 300 pilgrims living in several places in Leiden. They were worried they were losing their religious identity and so some of the group left for new pastures. In St Pieterskerk, we looked at the memorial tablets to the Pilgrim Fathers on the church walls.

At the end of our walk, Dawn took us into the entrances of two of the Hofjes and explained how they had originated - a Hofje is a small courtyard with almshouses surrounding it. The have existed since the Middle Ages and were privately funded by individuals to provide housing for the elderly and poor. The Jean Pesijnhofje that we saw dated from 1683. They reminded me of the almshouses in Bristol, but these were calmer and more secluded.

Many thanks to Dawn for organising such an informative tour. I'm certainly going to visit again.