The Fairburn Singers – Yorkshire & Humber – Sally Whittingham

Prague/Karlovy Vary, Czechia – June 2023

Day One - Tuesday 20 June 2023 – 5.30am

46 excited choir members, and family and friends, gathered to board the coach at Fairburn to Luton airport on a lovely summer’s morning. Our long-awaited trip to Czechia was about to start. Our MD, Andris, had been instrumental in planning a very busy schedule for the choir around Prague and Karlovy Vary, including a couple of flash mob opportunities and a concert in a beautiful church in Sedlec.

It's fair to say that the weather deteriorated the closer we got to Luton, in fact, a scheduled stop at Watford Gap could not have been more badly timed! When we tried to leave the services to get back on the coach, the rain was so heavy that we were all soaked in the few seconds it took to run from the building to the coach – not the best start! And that setback was exacerbated on arrival at the airport to find our Wizzair flight was delayed by 2 hours!

However, the flight eventually left Luton and made very good time arriving at Václav Havel airport, Prague, one and half hours later. But due to the delay, our coach transfer to Prague city had disappeared. Several frantic phone calls, and a pint of beer or two later, he reappeared, and we were on our way to our hotel. By now, the carefully planned itinerary was already 2.5 hours late, so on arrival at the hotel, we just about had time for a quick change before we were hustled out to the designated restaurant for our pre-ordered meal. Finally able to relax in a very convivial atmosphere, we enjoyed our first Czechian meal and several more glasses of beer and wine. Exhausted after our early start and all the delays, we were very happy to return to our hotel, put on the air con (it was around 26°C) and retire to bed.

Day Two - Wednesday 21 June 2023

After a lovely breakfast taken in the hotel courtyard, and a chorus of happy birthday for me, we met in the foyer to be introduced to our guides Alice and Teresa who would be walking us around the sites of Prague city centre. We arrived via the very efficient tram system and set off.

Prague is bisected by the Vltava River. Nicknamed ‘the City of a Hundred Spires,’ it's known for its Old Town Square, the heart of its historic core, with colourful baroque buildings and Gothic churches. We were soon taking in the sights of the Lennon Memorial Wall. Located in a small and secluded square across from the [French Embassy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Embassy), the wall has been decorated by [love poems](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_poem) and short messages against the regime since the 1960s. It received its first decoration connected to John Lennon—a symbol of freedom, [western culture](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_culture), and political struggle—following the 1980 [assassination of John Lennon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_John_Lennon) when an unknown artist painted a single image of the singer-songwriter and added some lyrics. The wall continuously undergoes change, and the original portrait of Lennon is long lost under layers of new paint. Even when the wall was repainted by the authorities, by the next day it was again full of poems and flowers. Today, the wall represents a symbol of global ideals such as love and [peace](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peace).

We continued past other places of interest until we ascended the steps onto historic Charles Bridge. Completed in 1402, pedestrian Charles Bridge is lined with statues of Catholic saints.  It was also the site of our first flash mob rendition of a choir favourite, *One Voice.* We executed this perfectly to the surprise of several visitors on the bridge and in the surrounding buildings. We then continued our tour through the Old Town until we reached the medieval Astronomical Clock which is attached to the [Old Town Hall](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Town_Hall_%28Prague%29) and which gives an animated hourly show.

The clock was first installed in 1410, making it the third-oldest astronomical clock in the world and the oldest clock still in operation. The clock mechanism has three main components – the astronomical dial, representing the position of the [Sun](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sun) and [Moon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moon) in the sky and displaying various astronomical details; statues of various [Catholic saints](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint#Catholic_Church) stand on either side of the clock. Legend has it that the clockmaker, Hanuš, was blinded on the order of the Prague Councillors so that he could not repeat his work; in turn, he disabled the clock, and no one was able to repair it for the next hundred years. We joined the throngs of people waiting for the 12 o clock chimes, and with phones ready to record, we watched the short spectacle.

A free afternoon followed and a very pleasurable dinner cruise along the River Vltava for some of us in the evening, rounded off day two of our tour.

Day Three - Thursday 22 June 2023

Our guides were once more in evidence as this time we travelled up to the magnificent Prague Castle in 30°C heat. With its origin dating back to the early days of 870, the royal palace of[Prague Castle](https://www.praguecastletickets.com/) **has been an integral part of Prague’s history** and has stood the test of time with the help of renovation, expansion, and repair works. An ancient symbol of the Czech State, the most significant Czech monument and one of the most important cultural institutions in Czechia, Prague Castle is considered the **largest coherent castle complex** in the world and is lauded as a monument of cultural and historical importance. The castle includes various historic buildings, palaces, gardens, courtyards, and churches. Included in the centre of Prague Castle is the magnificent St Vitus Cathedral, where once again we sang to the crowds, this time it was an unaccompanied version of *If Ye Love Me (Thomas Tallis).* Unfortunately, we were competing with the cathedral organist, but we were well received by those who could hear us!

We then made our way back down the hill to the Waldstein Gardens, a 17th-century garden at the Senate palace, with ornamental pools & baroque statues, and the site of yet another ad hoc flash mob rendition, this time we also sang another choir favourite *As Long as I have Music*. The rest of the afternoon was free time for lunch, and a final tour of Prague, before we were whisked off to our second destination, Karlovy Vary, a town approximately 1.5 hours north west of Prague.

Karlovy Vary (Carlsbad) is a spa town in the west Bohemia region of the Czechia. Its numerous thermal springs have made it a popular resort since the 19th century. The riverside spa district is home to several colonnades with columned walkways. The modern Hot Spring Colonnade houses the Pramen Vřídlo geyser, which spouts up to 12 metres high.

Here we were housed in two separate hotels which were very much in the style of the architecture of the town (and minus any air con) and where dinner was arranged at the restaurant of Hotel Ruze. We were still plagued by 27°C temperatures in the evening and with the threat of a storm to come overnight, we were advised to keep windows and doors closed. Sleeping was not an easy task for any of us that night!

Day Four – Friday 23 June 2023

However, as Day Four dawned, and after a very mediocre storm, the temperature had dropped to 16° and it was raining! We had the day free to explore the town and its environs. I joined a group who went up the funicular railway to the Diana Tower which isa massive four-sided brick building with bevelled corners, built on a prismatic stone plinth and supplemented by a covered wooden walkway of the observation platform, reaching a total height of 40m. The observation walkway at a height of 35m is accessible by 150 wooden stairs spiralling counterclockwise or for those less willing to climb them, there was a lift. **From the tower there is a view** of practically the entire city of Karlovy Vary, the valley of the rivers Ohře and Teplá and a large part of the spa forests. To the north, the Ore Mountains with Klínovec, to the east the Doupovské Mountains and to the south west, the Slavkovský Forest. On a clear day, you can also see the peaks of the Fichtelgebirge (Smrčiny) mountains in the west-southwest, and up to a distance of 70 km.

Also at the top of the funicular was the amazing 100 year old wooden structure which is now a restaurant, along with a small farm and an incredible Butterfly House, where you joined the butterflies flying freely around you, and in some case landing on you.

Back down in the town, it was refreshing to be able to stroll through the pedestrianised areas of the town, so different from the heat and crowds of Prague, and we were able to enjoy a leisurely lunch before meeting up in full choir uniform later in the day on the steps of the pavilion for a quick photocall and yet another rendition of *One Voice* for the inhabitants and visitors of Karlovy Vary who had gathered to see what we were all doing!

At around 5.15pm, we travelled the short distance to the little village of Sedlec, home to St Annes Church and the venue for our planned and widely advertised concert. The church has the most amazing acoustics, and after a quick rehearsal, our concert began at 7pm, to a packed church of local people, who enjoyed listening to a medley of songs from *Les Miserables, Phantom of the Opera, Oklahoma, A Tribute to Queen* as well as choir favourites *It Don’t Mean a Thing* and *Let the River Run*. One of the highlights for us was that our compere (and Chair), Janet, was accompanied by a translator, who had excellent English and managed to convey to the audience many of the nuances that Janet is well known for, including encouraging audience participation for the start of *We will Rock You* (stamp, stamp, clap)!

After the concert, we were once more conveyed back to Karlovy Vary and to the Goethe Beer House where our third pre-ordered and arranged meal took place. Everyone was in high spirits on the back of a very well received and executed concert. We took advantage of our last night and enjoyed our time together reminiscing about the success of the whole trip.

Day Five – Saturday 24 June 2023

We left Karlovy Vary at 11.15am, heading back to the airport, where once again we were greeted with the news that our flight was delayed by 2.5 hours. In all, we spent 6 hours at Prague airport waiting for our flight! The delay at Prague meant an ongoing delay back at Luton, but our coach was waiting for us and we began our journey back home up the M1, stopping briefly at the services to allow a change of drivers, and a McDonalds (the only hot meal offering that was open).

We eventually arrived back in Fairburn at 12.15am.

We had been on a fantastic trip, enjoyed by everyone involved. We survived the high temperatures and managed to negotiate the trams very successfully in Prague and then enjoyed the relative peace of Karlovy Vary. Our flash mob renditions were well received everywhere we went, and our concert was an absolute triumph.

As a choir, our thanks go to Andris, who is not only our MD, but an accomplished event organiser/travel agent and whose skills in this regard are second to none. We are now looking forward to our next choir trip which is a cruise on Fred Olsen Cruise Lines in May 2024 to the Isles of Scilly and Guernsey and a stop at Honfleur on the French Normandy coast.

Sally Whittingham
Choir Secretary
June 2023