

Holland

Thursday 5th December

To sail from Newcastle to IJmuiden in the middle of Storm Xavier and on the highest tide since 1953 seemed a trifle unwise, but DFDS saw no need to cancel....so, after an hour's delay to pass the peak of the tide, we slid out of the Tyne at around 18.30 into turbulent seas. To avoid the worst we hugged the coast, although this put two or three hours onto the journey time; actually had a decent night's sleep – although later found out that during the night hours the boat had lost electricity for some hours, and the use of one engine, and some travellers had been rolled out of their bunks. With morning came the need to cut out east across the North Sea and meet the big waves. During breakfast one of these hit the boat and produced a spectacular cascade of toppling tables and breakfasters, shattering crockery and scattering food; the captain thereupon ordered everyone to their cabins but we deemed it wiser to stay up where we could see what was going on... Finally disembarked at IJmuiden (where the waves were crashing right over the top of the lighthouse at the end of the breakwater) five hours late. The ferry company were agreeing to pay for freaked-out passengers to be flown back, so they consented quite happily to us changing our return passage for a day later.

Had to walk half a mile to find a bus stop; however Holland has clean and efficient public transport system so by bus and then train made it safely to our friends on the edge of Rotterdam. This seems a densely populated place, not much country in between the cities, everything very flat and criss-crossed by open waterways, lots of orderly and well-behaved people living in close proximity to each other in predominantly post-World War II housing.

Friday 6th December

Learned this morning that we are 14m below sea level. So if the tsunami strikes/methane-bubbles-off-the-coast-of-Norway burst, or pumps suddenly fail, a good deep breath might just see you up the surface, not that your problems would necessarily be over then... not a useful thought topic, really.

Today we are going to Delft, where we would have been yesterday if the ferry had been on time. Delft is an old town, only ten minutes on the train from Rotterdam, famous for its blue-and-white china. It is a bit like a slightly humbler version of Bruges, brick-built and set on a grid of canals, and dominated by two big churches, as in Amsterdam the Oude Kerk and the Nieuwe Kerk, both big cruciform late medieval buildings with massive western towers and spires. The Nieuwe Kerke is the mausoleum for the Royal family, who have their family crypt under the eastern arm; we are first informed that it is so private that no-one really knows what it looks like, then are presented with a huge cut-away model of it showing every detail... Both churches are floored by hundreds of dark limestone grave slabs, some huge, mostly with heraldry; we found one with an angel, and another with a skeleton, but nothing with a cross. Amongst the vicissitudes suffered by both churches were the Protestant Iconoclasm of 1566 and 1572, various fires, and the 'Delft Thunderclap' in 1654 when a huge gunpowder store nearby went up. To be honest both of these churches, like those in Amsterdam, feel like huge bleak barns and seem little more than museums today. The medieval monasteries of the town also suffered badly, although one nunnery to the west of the Oude Kerk has survived as it was converted to the Prinsenhof ('Prince's Court') when William of Orange made it his home in 1572. He led the country in its Protestant uprising against the occupying Spanish, and

was assassinated here in 1584; the resultant bullet holes in the wall of one staircase are still displayed, although there is some debate as to their authenticity. Experimental archaeology – recreating a gun and gunpowder of the period, and firing it through a piece of meat to represent the hapless William – produced only a chip in the plaster. This William of Orange by the way was not our William of Orange, who came a century or so later; it was through him (William III) that the Orange name still echoes in our consciousness, as the last waves of the great Reformation storm still slop around in the backwaters of Northern Ireland five centuries on.

The Prinsenhof proved profoundly frustrating in that the medieval phase of its history is completely ignored, to the extent that the custodian did not even know what a nun was..... yet the whole monastic complex seems well preserved; the church is still in use, but not open to the public. Enquiry at Tourist Information did not produce much help on other monastic sites, although a Franciscan Friary just inside the line of the town walls to the south-west of the centre seems to largely survive in the buildings of what is now a students' union. The town walls themselves have all but gone – one length of arcaded eincente survives near the aforesaid friary, and a solitary conical-roofed tower further north, close to a surprising urban windmill, but the principal relic is the very attractive Oostport (Eastgate) which is actually at the south-east corner of the town.

The main danger in Delft, and apparently all over this country, is cyclists. They are here in vast numbers – there is a huge double-decker cycle park beside the station – and in Dutch law they can do no wrong. One can safely rob banks and even attempt genocide (on non cyclists of course) if one does it on two wheels. As well as cyclists there are lots of scooters. If under 50cc their riders do not wear helmets. These machines – and they include some surprisingly large and bechromed semi-Harley specimens – are distinguished by blue number plates.

Back to Rotterdam as dusk fell, and an utter contrast to Delft in an hour's walk around the streets and waterfront of this vast modern city, rejoicing in its Christmas lights

Sunday December 8th

Morning walking out in a vast public park with a myriad cyclists and joggers, taking Adele (two and a half) and a large bunch of carrots to feed the animals; voracious giant rabbits and hoof-flailing goats jumping up at visitors were especially memorable. Then it was time to go- given a lift to the immense central station in Rotterdam, then train to Harlem and bus to Ijmuiden, although oddly it goes nowhere near the ferry – we ended up walking the best part of two miles through scruffy industrial estates, without even proper pavements. The ferry company runs a bus into Amsterdam, but this is no help if you are coming from the south.

Seas lower but still choppy; took our sea-sickness tablets again, and bravely decided to have an evening meal – it would appear we were the only people that did. Not a good idea. Bad night – up-and-down movement of ship difficult to sleep with, then in early hours ELR starting throwing up. This tuned out to be food poisoning, we thin, rather than sea sickness, as the illness continued until the end of the week. Only pleasant thing was coming into the Tyne in the early morning light, PFR took piccies but his camera was on a high-sensitivity setting so they were lousy quality. £40.00 to pay for parking the car....

Not a trip to repeat in a hurry.