

## **Day 1 - Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> July – Southend to New York**

It was 3.30am, and even though we were all blurry eyed, there was clearly excitement in the air. As the coach pulled away, we waved goodbye to our families for 2 weeks – It was in this dark, early morning that our American adventure began.



About 16 hours later, we were on the other side of the Atlantic. After we had all (only just!) got past American immigration, we

stepped outside of JFK airport for our first glimpse of NY, and soon met our NYC tour guide – Martha ‘Poppins’ (as she became known) and our tour bus driver, Ed.

Soon we entered the busy Friday afternoon streets of Manhattan, and started our sightseeing on the coach, shortly stopped for the 3<sup>rd</sup> meal of our (long) day. Whilst I went for a NYC deli, others went for the more ‘homely’ Subway or McDonalds – the latter soon to become a regular occurrence for many!

After battling our way through the traffic, we left New York State to go to our hotel on neighbouring New Jersey, where we all settled in with our roommates. I had the pleasure of sharing with Rich and Rob. After our dinner at the I-HOP, where the group bonding continued, most of us headed to our rooms for an early night.

## **Day 2 - Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> July – New York**

Thanks to jetlag (and an annoying car alarm) I woke at 5.40, and Rich, Rob and I were all ready for breakfast before our early morning call had come through. After our pancake breakfast, we boarded the coach for Liberty Island, where we were to give our premiere performance. Shortly we boarded the ferry, and everyone started going snap happy for Lady Liberty. After a short ride, we had arrived. Plagued by a technical difficulty, we were forced to sing an acapella 2-song set in our red polo shirts. However, the small crowd that stopped to listen were very receptive our ‘angelic’ voices. It was then time to hit the shop and start to collect souvenirs.



After a further short boat trip, the majority of us safely landed on Ellis Island, where our cultural part of the day – a museum visit – was undertaken, in

which my group spent 5 minutes in the actual museum! After a quick snack and drink, we admired the NY skyline, and once again found ourselves boarding a ferry.

We shortly arrived at back on the mainland, and at Pier 17, where we munched on our packed lunches, and did a little bit of shopping and watched a contortionist. It was then to New Jersey, for our first formal concert, in the small, friendly Stanton neighbourhood, where we were treated to the first of many delicious church cooked dinners. We sang, and unexpectedly got our first standing ovation (with many more to come), before getting a chance to talk with the audience and heading back to the hotel.

### **Day 3 - Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> July – New York**



No time for a Sunday lie-in as it was straight towards the Empire State Building after our second pancake breakfast. We all enjoyed the great view, albeit a little windy, before we congregated back downstairs – this time I was prepared for the ear-popping lifts! The rest of the morning was spent in Chinatown and Little Italy, just wandering the shops and enjoying a taste 2 of the many different cultures contained inside the big apple.

Wall Street and the financial district was our next destination, but we were soon let loose on Century 21 department store, for some retail therapy. Rob, Rich and I then progressed to McDonalds on Broadway with chaperones Mhoria and Hugo. As the pianist played above us, and you could view people having table service upstairs, it seemed like the wrong place to be eating McNuggets!

The five of us then moved towards Ground Zero. It was here that an indescribable feeling rose up inside of me. It seemed weird that people were taking picture of a big hole, and even weirder that people were staring at one. We then entered St Paul's Chapel, just across the road.

The building was full of tourists, looking at the 9/11 exhibition, and it was comforting to see huge banners of support for relief workers from local communities placed around the chapel.

Here we gave an early afternoon performance, and stopped ourselves to look at the exhibition ourselves.



We boarded the coach for one last time with Martha as we slowly drove to St. Bart's Church for our last NY performance, in the evening service. However, we had just a little time to shop beforehand. I headed with a group to Conway's Music in Times Square, a shop plastered from ceiling to floor with every type of sheet music. It seemed such a small shop, but still we managed to loose 2 people!

After our performance, we once again got to mingle with the congregation, and get to know them a little, before heading for the hotel, and a late dinner at the I-HOP. Soon the adults were walking down every corridor, ensuring our suitcases were packed, and we were going to bed - a late night was unavoidable.

### **Day 4 - Monday 26<sup>th</sup> July – New York to Boston**

Again waking before everyone else, Rich, Rob and I succeeded in coming down for breakfast before everyone – even the adults. After breakfast, we all started appearing out of the hotel with suitcases, ready to move on to Boston. A day of travelling was planned, but it gave us the perfect opportunity for coach sing-a-longs.

After travelling for 4 hrs we stopped for lunchtime at the largest mall in Connecticut. 2 hours of pure shopping indulgence brightened everybody's mood, and the coach was soon filled of chatter about each other's purchases.

After a further period of travel, we arrived at a church in the Boston suburbs, where we met our hosts – the New England Treble Chorus. Everyone shared a pizza dinner with our hosts, and started to get to know them well. We were soon heading to our new lodgings after a quick rehearsal.



Rob, Rich and I were also sharing this time, to our advantage, with Liz and Emily, as we soon discovered when Laundry Lady Liz collected our washing, once that is we had retrieved my missing suitcase! We then all tucked into some chocolate brownies with our hosts, the Kazans (Holly and Meg) and the Smiths (Cliff and Suzanne). As the girls bonded with Meg, we boys went down to our bedroom in the basement.

As I came up to say good night, Holly confronted me with the burning question: what did I want for lunch? In less than 5 minutes, the kitchen was then full of people and food preparing 12 separate lunches, complete with brown paper bags! Although it was manically crazy, it was a fun way to end the day.

## **Day 5 - Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> July - Boston**

For once, we boys overslept a bit, but I was soon ready to go for a bagel breakfast. We then set off for the coach with lunches in tow. Due to 'Auntie' Holly overseeing all Boston hostings, she too boarded the coach to Salem.

We soon arrived in the village, and went into the graveyard before being toured round the small Museum by a Wickon. The gift shop however, seemed to excite more people! We then moved out onto some greenery for lunch and socialising, as well as games of Frisbee, baseball and football. It was good old playtime for the choir!



To our delight, we all stopped at a massive ice cream parlour, with dairy onsite. This was especially fun for me considering I had already had an ice cream but an hour ago!

Back at the Smith's house, Emily did all our ironing, whilst my favourite meal – lasagne – was prepared for my consumption. Racing to the church for our concert, the six of us started doing some warm-ups knowing we would inevitable be late.

It was here at St. Michael's Church that we gave our best concert to date. We praised the New England treble chorus, and they praised us back, for being lively. With everyone so enthusiastic, both choirs joined in an after-show sing-along.

Eventually we made our back to the Smith's house, where we had delicious American smores – the only problem being they were far too big. Once again we had to ensure we were packed before heading to bed.

## **Day 6 - Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> July – Boston to Niagara**

Once again I found I had overslept, but we still had plenty of time to get ready. Although I nearly left my pillow pal (NOT a cuddly toy) Marvin behind, and we nearly forgot Rob's lunch, after a bit of excitement all 5 of us arrived at the coach in one piece.

It was to be a long journey to Niagara, but it gave everyone some the perfect opportunity for a good heart to heart and general group bonding. By this point I myself had already made 5 new friends. However, it also paved the way for yet another sing-a-long. It was also a great time to catch up on some sleep...not that I did!

Eventually, after a long day's travel, we arrived at our motel for the night. The only problem is it meant carrying the suitcases up the stairs! We then drove down to the restaurant, where we were treated to having our own private dining room for an all-you-can-eat dinner!

Roger managed to flog a few CDs whilst we were eating, and soon we had another spontaneously singing through our repertoire, for sheer pleasure. With most of us in such a happy mood, we travelled to the Niagara State Park, and wandered to see the falls at night. What a spectacular sight it was, and a great chance for the girls' to point over the river towards Canada, and reminisce about their Canadian tour.

With most of the days activities completed, it was back to the motel and shortly everyone headed for the bedrooms, and hit the sack – tomorrow would be another day of travelling.

### **Day 7 - Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> July – Niagara to Akron**

Checking out of the motel, we then went on an “early morning” (8am) walk to the Bob Evans restaurant for our breakfast, but it made some of us realise that the I-HOP really wasn't that bad after all.

We then drove back to the falls, for yet some more breath taking views and photo opportunities. After staring at it for a while, Katy, Ben, Natalie and I set off for a brief walk – only to find Roger paying for the Maid of the Mist. Hastily we too paid for our tickets, jumped on board, and had a great time getting absolutely soaking wet, as well as looking the height of fashion in our blue covers.



It was soon after noon that we set off for Akron, and a late lunch was in order. The majority rushed for yet another McDonalds, while a select few of us went over to Arby's. It was quicker healthier, more upmarket and had a bell to ring as you left!

After another stint on the coach, we arrived at Akron, and knew we were stars when we saw our concert being advertised outside the church. With an hour before dinner, some of us headed for the mall right next door, for a bit of retail therapy, where I purchased the most exciting item of all – a pen!



After a tasty church cooked spaghetti Bolognese (the type of meal that led Christine to say “Who needs the I-HOP when you can

have the church?") we met our hosts. Rob, Rich and I certainly had the most interesting lodgings.

We were staying on the Gsellman Alpaca Farm. After meeting the alpacas, we talked with the Gsellmans, learning how they had 7 grown up kids, meaning that they had a games room for the grandchildren. We spent all evening down there, playing snooker, table football and ice hockey. After meeting sweet old Granny Gsellman, we soon headed for our beds.

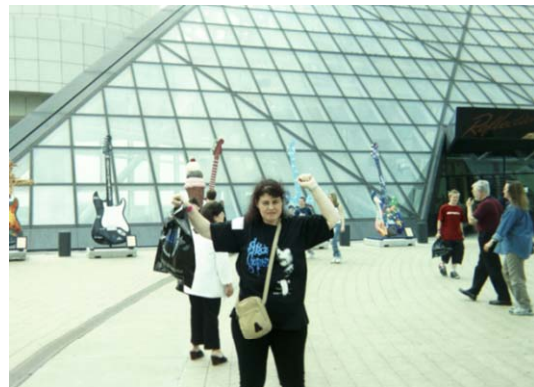
### **Day 8 - Friday 30<sup>th</sup> July – Akron**

One week into the tour, after yet more pancakes and a political discussion over breakfast, we once again boarded the faithful coach, this time headed for Cleveland.

Soon we started spotting 10ft guitars around the Cleveland streets, to find out it was their 'guitar parade'. It only helped excite those who were already looking forward to the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame.

We got some early morning shopping at Tower City Centre, before performing in the lovely Trinity Cathedral at lunchtime. Unfortunately, it was here the humid weather struck our first performance...

It was then on to the second museum of the tour, albeit about Rock. Inside the pyramid structure, lunch was the first port of call for my group, lead by Mhoira. We then preceded to look at gowns of 'The Supremes' - some nice and some not so nice...Two films on the progression of Rock 'n' Roll was next – it was surely a trip down memory lane for some of the adults with us! A last stop to the gift shop, and our rockin' trip – as well as Alison's 'homecoming' - was over.



It was then back to the Fairlawn Lutheran Church, where we had some playtime before our meal – tacos. It was here that we possibly gave our best concert since the beginning of the tour, and where the lyrics 'thunderbolt and lightning, very very frightening' took a new meaning as a thunderstorm raged above us. Once again we were pleased to get a standing ovation, and enjoyed socialising with the crowd in the interval.

The Gsellmans then took Rob, Rich and myself out to an ice cream parlour, with Granny Gsellman in tow. We all had too much ice cream, and did some colouring in, before heading back to the farm.

Once again, we spent some time in the games room, but as I was going to bed (maybe midnight was a *little* late) I discovered a teddy bear on my bed. Made of alpaca pelts, it still remains the softest bear ever! The same went for Rich and Rob, and we all received a card. I knew I would truly miss the Gsellmans.

### **Day 9 - Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> July – Akron to Chicago**

After another lovely breakfast, and as we left the Gsellmans behind (knowing I'd especially Granny Gsellman) we boarded the Chicago bound coach. Having bought cheap videos in Cleveland, Roger put on Spongebob Square Pants as entertainment. Being so riveting, I soon found myself sleeping, waking up just in time for 'Johnny English.'

After the long morning stint on the coach (with a stop or two) we piled off the coach for lunch at Wal-Mart. Though we were in a different time zone, it still seemed like a slightly late lunch. After eating, we had a little time left over to shop, yet not enough to do the entire store. A few hours later, we drove through Chicago city centre, and soon after stopped off at a K-Mart, but we were very near our destination.

We arrived early and had plenty of playtime before our next hosts took us back to their houses. Rich and Rob played some basketball against our host and his neighbour, before they showed the Americans how to play 'soccer'.



After stereotypical Englishman-American jokes over dinner, the whole family walked the dog to the ice cream parlour, where we met Katy and Roz, and talked about the

great time we were having.

Leaving Katy and Roz behind, we progressed to the local school and played in the playground – something you could rarely do in Britain after dark. We then played some badminton – with me being a useless sportsman as ever - before we retired to our bedrooms.

### **Day 10 - Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> August – Chicago**

After yet more pancakes we were quickly whisked to Winnetka Congregational Church, where, once everyone had just about made it, we performed in the Church service and all enjoyed a cup of tea outside on the lawn in the glorious sunshine.

We then went straight into the City centre to visit the famous Lincoln Park, and their free zoo. The excessively hot weather meant I decided to just lay in

the shade, and took time out for myself after a hectic week, but those who did go in the zoo thoroughly enjoyed seeing more chimps than just Richard and Roger!

It was then onto the beautifully over decorated St. James Cathedral for an intimate afternoon concert, before going back to our meet our hosts. Rich, Rob and I had the unusual situation of changing hosts at this point, and thus once again spent the evening getting acquainted with everyone. We enjoyed a game of 'soccer' and a walk around the local park. After actually contacting my parents (only by e-mail, and only because it was their wedding anniversary), we sat down to watch 'Shrek'. Unfortunately, the late nights finally took its toll on me and, I was soon asleep during the film!

### **Day 11 - Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> August – Chicago**

After showering in my own en suite bathroom in the basement, it was straight to breakfast and a relief this time just to have cereals, without any pancakes! We were soon back on the coach, where once again everyone was saying how much they loved their hosts. Our tour guide Barbara then took us to the Hancock Observatory, with lifts even faster than the ones at the Empire State Building!

After enjoying a great view, it was shopping time at Niketown, and soon after we were at Chicago Millennium Park – naturally it only opened 2 weeks before our visit! As we lay down in the humid weather, felling hot and bothered, I was not having fun (due to several reasons) and said how I missed home.



Yet just an hour later, I was once more on top of the world, as most of the choir got absolutely soaking wet (for the second time) at the Crown Fountain. Once we had all dried, it was time for another one of our rare cultural outings – the Bahá'í House of Worship – one of only 7 completed houses of worship around the world.

We briefly did an acapella performance in the architecturally amazing building before watching a film about the religion. There we met a fellow Brit, who showed some of us around, before we were all given a cookie before going on our way. However the experience did not convert me.

It was time for our concert in Trinity United Methodist Church, famed for its use in 'Home Alone'. Here we wowed yet another crowd, as well as ourselves – it was our best concert of the tour, including a fantastic solo by Ben Shepherd.



With one night in Chicago left, we whizzed back to our hosts, where Rich, Rob and I were, like many, treated to Chicago pizza – so thick was this pizza rabbits could burrow in it! However, it was a delightfully tasty meal before bedtime.

### **Day 12 - Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> August – Chicago to Appleton**

Having had a sugar filled bowl of Froot Loops for breakfast, we drove back to the church, and waited for everyone to arrive before departing for Navy Pier, where the Ferris wheel and yet more shops were just some of the highlights.

After the enjoyable morning, it was time to leave Chicago for Wisconsin, and we were soon on the road, where it was another opportunity to sleep or chat. With only relatively short travel time, a pit stop in Wal-Mart was the perfect opportunity for me to stock up on presents for the family.

Soon we arrived at the church, where our final concert of the tour (and the final choir concert for some of the older choristers) was to shortly take place. After tucking into yet another delightfully prepared meal, it was showtime. We were soon joyfully happy, after giving another splendid recital, knowing that we didn't have to sing again for a long while!



After the concert, we met by our final hosts of the tour - the Bryans. Rich, Rob and I were lucky enough to go back to their house and entertain ourselves by playing the organs in our bedrooms!

### **Day 13 - Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> August – Appleton**

With all the concerts done, today was to pure indulgence of fun. We set off for Green Bay, where we all enjoyed the amusement park, and piling onto the rides for some much needed relaxation. Some of us then hot-footed it across the road (with permission) to 'Fort Fun', where some of us choristers got absolutely soaking wet one final time when on the bumper boats. But it was the go-karting that we (including a certain chaperone) loved the most – even if I did crash twice!



After eating lunch on the greenery, it was onwards to our final museum of the trip – the Harry Houdini museum. We all had a go at become great illusionists, and testing our strength in several areas, as well as learning about some of Houdini's greatest tricks.

It was then back to the (very big) house of the organizer of our Appleton leg of the tour. Here, all 51 of us had the pleasure of being let loose in his garden, complete with hammock and marshmallows to toast in the bonfire before the garden became the woods. We all enjoyed one final playtime and barbeque, before heading back to our hosts' houses.



Some enjoyed a ball game whilst others went to the mall, but unfortunately the hot tub party became hot-tub-less! Rich, Rob and I however spent the night washing and doing some much needed packing! Over some cake we talked to our hosting family, and once more played the organs before leaving for the coach's midnight departure.

### **Day 14 - Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> August – Appleton to Southend**

Having been the first to arrive at the church and already talked to everyone about how they spent their last evening, it was a quiet journey to the airport in Chicago, full of sleeping "beauties". I too, like many others unintentionally dozed off, and we all felt exceptionally tired, if we weren't sleeping, whilst waiting to board the plane at Chicago O'Hare.

On the plane, I once again unintentionally fell asleep, and ate even more food. We gave a final spontaneous sing-a-long of our repertoire as we smoothly landed back down on British soil.



After collecting luggage, some girls left us as they cried with joy seeing their parents waiting for their arrival. I too thought of the family I would be seeing again in a matter of hours as I boarded a coach for the last time.

Del and I then spent the final leg of the journey home analysing the tour, while Joely and Liz said a tearful goodbye to the choir they grew up with. We were soon back in Southend, albeit now Friday 6<sup>th</sup>, and although we were all unbelievably tired, we said hello to the families we left behind, and farewell to our choir buddies we were leaving behind.

The tour was without doubt a resounding success, and like the brief trip to Paris I undertook with the Boys' Choir, I had great fun away from my family! Everyone made new friends, and some made more than just new friends. Altogether, the best 2 weeks of my life!