

*“Step away from the dog.” Four secret service men, all dressed in black, appeared out of nowhere. I froze, hand stretched out in mid air, poised to stroke the dog. I hesitated – were they joking? It’s a dog! They took a step forward, I took a step back. “I’m so sorry”, I blurted out, my British accent sounding blatantly obvious in comparison with the smooth American drawl of the crowd that was beginning to gather, hoping to witness a scandal in the White House. As possible newspaper headlines began to flash before my eyes, I quickly walked away, and inspected the display on the wall. Before I could recover from my embarrassment, my eyes glanced over a picture of a dog, and not just any dog – the same one that I had been forbidden to touch. Yes – the white front paws and fluffy fur was undeniably the same! My eyes found the caption below “President Obama finds time in his busy schedule to walk the First Dog, Bo Obama.”*

Each year, the History department take a group of Year 12 History, and Government and Politics students for the school trip of a lifetime – to experience the famous historical, political and, I must admit, commercial sites of America.

Behind the scenes, and working frantically to arrange the details and intricacies of the tour, was Mrs Heap. What with sending Visa forms, passport details and medical information, her life must have been hectic for the preceding weeks of the trip, and I’d just like to take this opportunity to thank her for all her efforts. We truly appreciate it. As well as visiting Washington DC we also experienced the delights of New York and Philadelphia – not forgetting a tour of Amish country in Pennsylvania. However, it was this year’s group that were lucky enough to experience the unforgettable tour of the White House.

Firstly, we had to queue outside the White House walls, where we were ticked off a list by security and allowed into another queue. After shuffling step-by-step, and nervously chatting amongst both ourselves and the other ‘chosen few’ people in the queue, we reached the front. Our passports were checked thoroughly and we were questioned. From here, we joined (yet another!) queue that led us to the end of the human aspect of the security checks. It was now up to technology. A tunnel of metal detectors, bag scanners, full body scanners and sniffer-dogs left our emotions frayed, jittery and drained. But we were still smiling – we were now inside the White House!

The tour was self-guided. This doesn’t mean we were allowed to ‘roam free’, searching for President Obama in the Oval Office, or the First Lady in the gardens. We were strictly contained and monitored to the ground floor. With security guards (fondly nicknamed Action Men) everywhere, and cameras focusing on every move, it was an intimidating, yet thrilling experience.

In the White House, we saw the likes of the Red Room, the Blue Room and the Green room (and yes – they are painted red, blue and green.) We learnt interesting facts and trivia about each room, and how past Presidents, compared to the current President, used it.

In addition we also saw The East Room (the largest room in the White House which is used for receptions, concerts, press conferences and other large events. It has hosted many weddings including those of Lynda Bird Johnson and Alice Roosevelt.) The China Room (and yes, it did contain china, and glass, used by the Presidents.) The Vermeil Room is another one we saw, and this, too, contained a collection of vermeil (gilded silver) that is used for large events.

*With our allotted forty-five minutes up, we slowly and reluctantly made our way down the front steps and were streamed into the river of tourists, wildly taking photos and singing the 'Star Spangled Banner' outside the front gates. It was then that I noticed a small group of Bolton School girls gathering round. Intrigued, I made my way towards them and as I drew near, I heard the distinct Scottish accent that belonged to Mr King, a History teacher at our school. This being the penultimate day of our trip, I was now used to his stories, totally unbelievable from anyone else, but because he'd said it, there was a slight chance that it could be true. I ignored him, and turned to walk away, but something I heard captured my attention. He was holding up his left hand, and the girls, in turn, raised their hand to his. "What's going on?" I asked a girl who was fighting her way to the front of the crowd. "It's Mr King", she said. "He touched it! He touched the dog!"*

Now, I've heard many preceding sixth formers describe how it felt to visit the historical sites, and say that being there brought history alive for them, and now I can say I understand exactly how they felt. The most memorable of which being our visit to the Lincoln memorial, where I stood on the spot where Martin Luther King made his famous 'I Have a Dream' speech, during the March on Washington of the summer of 1963. I heard the words of the speech ringing in my ears, and could vividly imagine the sea of people, stretching right out to the Washington Memorial in front of me, that had gathered there to witness an important moment in history.

That day, we experienced a catalogue of famous landmarks, from John F. Kennedy's grave in Arlington Cemetery, to the moving war memorials, featuring statues dedicated to the memory of those who fought in the World Wars and the Vietnam War. The statue dedicated to the African American lives lost during World War Two was particularly pertinent to our studies, and had a great impact on our group.

The following day, before we started our journey North to Newark, we took some time to see the Museum of American History. You'd never guess that a group of teenage girls could get so excited about a Formica Woolworths counter, but we did. It was the counter at which the famous four African American students sat themselves down, and began one of the most effective Civil Rights protests of the 60s. We participated in the miniature performance that took place around the counter, that re-enacted the bravery shown by these students, and it was with pride that our teachers observed us correct a historical mistake made by the guide.

To end our day, we took a stroll towards the Capitol building, and sat on the grass, eating pretzels and snow cones until our hearts content, before heading off to the Hard Rock Café for dinner.

The 7 day trip was a fantastic opportunity to see the places we study and to bring history alive for us. We'd like to thank the History department staff that accompanied us, and provided the knowledge that made this once-in-a-lifetime experience so interesting. So, the next time I write an essay about Civil Rights, I have more of an insight to what it was like, and I can say 'I've been there'.