

German Exchange 2005

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Since 1958 the town of Enniskillen has been twinned with the German town of Brackwede, something that is a source of pride for residents of both towns. Since 1972 school exchanges have taken place between the two towns, students from one town are given an exchange partner of roughly their own age and stay with this partner and their family for the duration of the exchange. Over the years there have been a great many friendships made.

Today, Brackwede is but one small suburb of the sprawling modern city of Bielefeld, an historic linen town turned thriving metropolis, which has over time engulfed numerous other small towns resulting in a city twinned with no less than seven cities and towns across the world, including places as diverse as Israel, Russia, as well as our own hometown of "Enniskillen/Fermanagh".

The Exchange is in two stages, the first being the visit of the German pupils to Northern Ireland, where they meet their partners and take part in a range of activities and excursions designed to educate them in local culture, help them with their English, and-most importantly-to enjoy themselves. The second, normally a year later, is the part wherein the group from Enniskillen visits Brackwede, and stays with a local family.

This year, going on the exchange were some 30 pupils from Portora Royal, Enniskillen Collegiate and St Michael's College, accompanied by three teachers, one from each of the schools: Mr Brendan Rasdale from St Michael's, Miss Emma Hamilton from the Collegiate and Mrs McCready from Portora.s

The group arrived outside the "Brackwede Gymnasium" in mid afternoon on Friday after a long and arduous trip that had begun in the (very) small hours of the morning and shuffled in a zombie-esque manner off the bus to meet with their partners, most of whom they hadn't seen in a year. As soon as they met up, all tiredness vanished as, despite the obvious language barrier, old friends met up, catching up on all that had happened in the intervening year.

The group was then ushered into the school, where hands were shaken, greetings exchanged and warm welcomes extended to all. All visitors were also issued with town "passports", entitling them to free use of the town's extensive public transport facilities.

This was just as well as the guests had the weekend free with their families and Germans, being much greener than ourselves, make full use of their excellent public transport system. The trams in particular were very good, running on time and showing us the meaning of "German efficiency". More than once, however, students saw the tram door shut in their face and watched in horror as the tram rolled off!

On Saturday night, the suburb of Ummeln played host to a disco, which served to break down the few barriers that there were between the visitors and hosts, and indeed between the groups of visitors, who had previously only spoken to those from their own schools.

As the days went on, students began sampling different aspects of German cuisine, including the

famous sausages and somewhat infamous sauerkraut.

On Monday the group visited the Brackwede Gymnasium and attended classes with their partners, one Northern Irish student having the misfortune to be singled out in French class by the teacher for an interrogation. The student was left at the end unsure of what language to speak, French, German or English!!

In the afternoon the group travelled to the Rathaus, or town hall for a reception in the council chamber. Herr Kienitz, the Bürgermeister, or mayor, extended his warmest welcomes to the group, and the guests lunched on lasagne. Not very German, I know, but it would have been rude to refuse!

The following day was a trip around the local area, taking in the sights, including Mr Rasdale's personal favourite, the Hermannsdenkmal, or Hermann monument, an enormous statue of a first century German barbarian chieftain. Hermann war ein Barbar!

Wednesday saw a visit to the Universum science centre, similar to our own W5. The science centre was a huge hit with the visitors, with such attractions as an earthquake simulator and, bizarrely, a walk-in womb! In the afternoon the group was given free rein to go shopping.

As well as the trips arranged by the Enniskillen teachers and Herr Franke, their German counterpart, the visiting students also arranged outings with their partners families, and with other guests and their partners. Teenagers being teenagers whatever language is spoken, a lot of these visits involved the cinema, or the local theme park. One night saw a very competitive football match take place.

On Thursday, the group played "Mr X". In this game the visitors were divided into groups and given a German partner to work with. One of the groups was given the title Mr X, and the others had to catch them. However, both Mr X and the pursuers were required to keep to the public transport system and Mr X was required to text "his" position to Mr Rasdale at the school. He would then text Mr X's last known position to the pursuers.

As the trip wound down to its close a melancholy atmosphere descended on the group, but it was not all doom and gloom, as the final day, was regarded as one of the best. On Friday, the group took part in a series of "team building activities" in a centre not dissimilar from Gortatole, and by all accounts it was great fun.

Saturday was time to go, and as the bus prepared to depart, there was a moving farewell as the partners and their families came to wish the group well. Everyone promised to stay in touch and visit one another. The bus rumbled off.

On the way to the airport, the group stopped at a vast shopping centre, with upwards of 1000 shops. The atmosphere inside was somewhat like that of an anthill with hundreds and hundreds of people milling about in an endless sea of consumerism. Stand still and you'll be swept away.

The flight from Düsseldorf took off at half past ten, and the group was home at midnight.

Herr Kienitz mentioned that the 50th anniversary of Enniskillen's twinning with Brackwede is approaching. If all exchange trips are as good as this one was, let's hope it lasts another 50 years.