

## HCPT (RN) – 2009 Pilgrimage Report

This year's RN pilgrimage to Lourdes with HCPT - The Pilgrimage Trust (formerly the Handicapped Children's Pilgrimage Trust) took place 12 - 19 April 2009.

To mark the RN's 30th anniversary within HCPT, we were delighted to welcome the Second Sea Lord, Vice Admiral Alan Massey, and Command Warrant Officer, Warrant Officer Andy Rainey, for a two day visit mid way.

Both children and helpers alike hugely enjoyed the visit, eager to show 2SL the work we do in Lourdes every year under the White Ensign, of which we are all immensely proud. In turn, Admiral Massey and Mr Rainey rolled their sleeves up and "got stuck in" right from the start, describing their visit as having "blown their socks off!"



This year's RN contingent numbered 66 people, including 26 children, 14 being direct dependants of RN personnel and 4 dependants of other services. Of the adult helpers, 16 were serving personnel, with 3 former naval personnel and 8 RN spouses or dependants. The conditions of the children within our groups included Autism, ADHD, Type 1 Diabetes, Deafness, Aspergers, Dyspraxia, Left Sided Hemi Plegia, Severe Learning Difficulties, Global Developmental Delay and a range of Behavioural Difficulties.

Units represented included HM Ships ALBION, ASTUTE, DRAKE, NELSON, 854 NAS, CTCRM, HMNB CLYDE, MDHU (Portsmouth), Keogh Barracks, RNU Derriford and the EU Military Staff, spanning from AB to Capt RN.

As ever, the week's programme was a blend of religious activities associated with the Shrine of Lourdes, along with a range of secular pursuits. It included participation in an evening torchlight procession and the annual HCPT Trust Mass, which brings together all 5000 people taking part in the pilgrimage, as well as a day at the beach, a fancy dress party, a magic show, and a trip to some local caves. Fortunately the weather was kind to us this year, which allowed us to spend much time in the glorious riverside surroundings, playing outdoor games that the children love, but rarely get the chance to enjoy.



This year's venture was once again generously supported by the Royal Navy & Royal Marines Charity, along with a range of businesses from within the three base port areas. Considerable amounts were also raised by the 3 RN groups and offered by many RN ships, establishments and messes.

Some more photos from this year's pilgrimage are overleaf, along with some background details regarding the organisation and the RN's part within it.

HCPT - The Pilgrimage Trust was established in 1956 to take children with special needs on pilgrimage to Lourdes in the foothills of the Pyrenees. It is here in 1858 that Catholics believe the Virgin Mary appeared on eighteen occasions to a young girl by the name of Bernadette, setting off a series of miraculous healing events to those who visited the shrine. Lourdes now attracts over five million visitors every year, with HCPT's annual pilgrimage a fixture in the prime period commencing on Easter Sunday. The founding principle of HCPT differed with the approach of other pilgrimages where the sick and infirm were "parked" in hospitals at the end of each day whilst their carers retired to comfortable hotels. From the outset, HCPT set out to keep groups together, establishing as the group speed the speed of the least able.



From a single group in 1956 based around four children, the annual HCPT pilgrimage now gathers an annual participation of over 5000, of which nearly 2200 are children. Based in Rugby with a full time staff of around fifteen, HCPT now attracts groups from every corner of the UK and Ireland, as well as groups from the West Indies, Slovakia, Croatia, Romania and the USA.

Every year, we see the children making friends early on, and it is very moving to see them realising what they could do rather than focussing on their limitations. In many cases, the HCPT pilgrimage provides the first opportunity for the children to live in an environment where their condition does not set them apart from the norm but rather is the norm, and many observe that Lourdes is the one place where passers by don't stare. It is also striking to see how tears caused by homesickness at the start of the week often return when saying goodbye to friends at the end. Memories such as these remain forever with those privileged to have encountered them, and never fail to bring a tear or two even to the eye of the "toughest" helpers!

The RN became involved in HCPT in 1979, with sailors from RALEIGH assisting with the physical task of moving groups and their luggage. This led to the creation of the first formal RN group in 1982 based on personnel from the Plymouth area. Since then, RN groups have also been formed in Portsmouth and Faslane. Joined in 1988 by a group from the RAF, the core of an Army group already exists for 2010. The Armed Forces constitutes a region in their own right within the HCPT structure, presenting a consistently powerful and highly visible symbol within such a large annual gathering of young people.



An indication of the importance of the RN within HCPT is that when the history of the organisation was written on its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the founder of HCPT "rescrubbed" the first draft, as insufficient mention had been made of the RN!

In personal development terms, the part played by our serving helpers constitutes Command Leadership and Management (CLM) training "in the raw". Totally involved in planning, they play a full part in organising daily routines for their charges, dealing with personal crises as they arise and coping with the emotional fallout of difficult personal issues. Others might call it simply "good character-building" stuff. Whichever you prefer, it sends our people back to their units taller and more complete individuals.

And finally, a message from children and helpers alike to all who have supported us in 2009 and previously....



Any enquiries regarding HCPT (RN) should be directed to the Regional Secretary at [hcpt-186.admin@ntlworld.com](mailto:hcpt-186.admin@ntlworld.com).