

Crémant, Crêpes and Camembert: January 2012 in Entre-deux-Eaux

We thoroughly enjoyed the time we spent in the UK over Christmas with friends and family, watching Jacob's latest achievement (look at me standing up without holding on!) and catching up on news and exhibitions. And thanks to our main hosts, Jessica and Mark, where we prolonged our stay in order to see everyone! The feasting and festivities, whether traditional English, Indian or Tunisian were wonderful.

But the festivities were not over when we returned to Entre-deux-Eaux. In fact group celebrations seemed just to be starting! First came Friday evening's *Cérémonie des Voeux* at which the Mayor of Entre-deux-Eaux welcomed villagers with a glass of *crémant* (Alsace sparkling wine) or *kir* and nibbles and gave a speech about the year's events and issues - mainly sewage and *com-coms*, both of which are unresolved.

There are so many layers of bureaucracy, the French government is trying to rationalise one of them by merging communes into groupings with populations of no less than 5,000 and hopefully more than 12,000 inhabitants. There are currently about 36,000 communes in France, each with their own mayor and council (including six where there are no longer any inhabitants so the departmental prefect appoints a mayor!). In the Vosges department (population about 380,000) there are 515 communes giving an average population of about 420 if the 160,000 in Epinal, Saint-Dié-des-Vosges and Remiremont are excluded.

Most communes are now considered to be too small to be efficient: what is needed are communities of communes (*com-coms*). Our mayor and council have no wish to be allied with other communes and to pay for their grandiose projects and follies. Whilst many of the communes around us have already grouped together (and built new headquarters which look unused most of the time), ours has tarried. No-one want to be be married to big-spending Saint Dié, which also hasn't found partners. Nor do we want to be part of a belt of commuter communes encircling Saint Dié. We only want to be with other little rural communes which are happy logging and selling wood to keep down local taxes and are prudent spenders. Eventually the council decided that maybe we could just about face joining with two or three rural communes in the Fave valley. But then came the latest pronouncement from on high: we should be submerged in a group of twenty-three communes around the river Fave. Horror and protest all round. The uncertainty continues. Meanwhile the issue of providing a modern sewerage system for both sides of the hill is also still unresolved. Septic Tanks Rule OK!

And it's not just the secular organisation. The local churches are also having to look at new ways of working. When we first came to the village, the church had its own *curé* or parish priest and held the usual masses on Sundays and feast days. In recent years the *paroisses* (parishes) had to join together and share the *curé* of Saint Leonard, and Entre-deux-Eaux had fewer than six services a year in its own church. Since the retirement last year of the two

curés in the region (who seem to have been brothers – real, blood ones), the ten parishes in the valley of the Meurthe have had work together as a community of parishes (are they therefore a *com-par*?) to examine what can be done by the laity. Interestingly, the grouping of parishes is quite different geographically from the proposed secular grouping, favouring the side of the River Meurthe rather than the River Fave which could be the two *eaux* between which our village lies (if *eaux* wasn't a mis-hearing of *hauts* when the communes were documented after the revolution).

The next *crémant* occasion was the next day, Saturday, when the pensioners of Sainte Marguerite celebrated with *galette des rois* (the frangipane tart of the three kings), *crémant*, and dancing. The dancing was as skilful as ever, including the nostalgic twist, the music was loud, and everyone howled the chorus of what was obviously an old favourite, “Ali Baba”, and joined in the conga as it spiralled, split and reformed.

And almost before one could recover from the excitement, there was the Entre-deux-Eaux mayor's lunch for the over 65s on the Sunday, which of course started with a glass of kir. This was John's first experience, as an over 65, of the leisurely drinking and eating, punctuated again with dancing. He was fortunately seated next to the husband of the president of the oldies club, who took it upon himself to gently exercise John's French, by speaking slowly and clearly. My neighbour, on the other hand, was very difficult to understand. The Vosgian accent can sound thick and slurred, but this was impenetrable. It was a relief when his cousin opposite explained that he was deaf from birth and an embarrassment to realize that he was saying he remembered meeting me in our early days here (when I hadn't understood what he'd come to our house for – we'd been asking around about accommodation for my mother as we weren't sure the decoration of the downstairs bedroom would be finished). However, by the time we'd worked our way through the courses (provided by a restaurant in Fraize) and their accompanying glasses of wine, and were on to the extremely strong home-brewed pear or blueberry liqueurs, nobody was too bothered. The accordionist was playing and people were dancing and we were idly wondering why the fireman's wife had a black eye. We walked home that night, but were a bit worried that everyone else seemed to be driving.

Four days later it was the AGM of the oldies group, which turns out not to be called the *Club des Anciens*, as Madame Laine refers to it, but the more elegant sounding *Association La Vie du Bon Coté*. The business was quickly dealt with and next year's subscriptions extracted. A few extra people then turned up (mainly husbands like John, who'd been invited to join in) and we settled down for the lunch which seems to be a popular follow-up to many a local AGM. The meal for sixty people had been cooked this time by the fireman's wife (her eye was looking much better by now) with the aid of the fireman. As the meal neared its end, John was introduced to the fun of the cheese song (below); it's about maggots breeding in a Camembert and during each chorus the men stand up and sit down (first lines), the women stand up and sit down (next lines), the men stand up and sit down (following lines) and the women ditto (last lines). Does this help digestion of the Camembert? Lunch over, the visiting husbands all slunk home, whilst the club members settled down to the

usual cards, gossip, and, on our table, a couple of convivial games of scrabble with a new member. And just in case anyone was still hungry, January's three birthdays were celebrated a little later with *crémant* and *galettes des rois*.

The AGM of the *Philomatique* was a much more serious and detailed affair, as befits a learned society dealing with all aspects of local and regional history. The president was at great pains to emphasise the value of the work done by the society and the respect it has beyond Saint Dié, whilst, sadly, it continues to be cold-shouldered within Saint Dié by the mayor and council. We saw a short presentation on endangered buildings and features in Saint Dié where restoration proposals are usually ignored. There was an interesting presentation on the work done by the *Temps de Guerre* section to have the Vosges recognised in the forthcoming national and international commemorations of the 1914-18 war, with 1916 being the particular year dedicated to the mountain warfare here. In October some of you walked along a short section of the German lines at the col de Hermanpaire with Helen; a plan to fund several similar guided footpaths round other sections of the Vosgian front is taking shape, and it is hoped that the whole network of *sentiers de mémoire* will obtain UNESCO world heritage site status. At the end of the AGM a recently-made film was shown about the events at a farm at Viombois on 4th September 1944 when fifty seven of the maquis, who had been waiting for a parachute drop by the English (which didn't take place) were surrounded and killed in a battle lasting all day. It was based on the memories of survivors, one of whom was there to join in the discussions afterwards.

One of the festivities that we forgot to celebrate this year was *Chandeleur*, or Candlemas on February 2nd. That morning, on the car radio, I'd heard snatches of spoof interviews with prominent political figures, - a bellowing Jean-Marie Le Pen, a sexy-voiced Dominique Strauss-Kahn, a prissy-sounding François Hollande, - giving their recipes for *crêpes* (pancakes) to the giggling presenters. John stocked up on eggs. But by evening it had slipped from our minds (must be old age) and John made a large pizza. We'll just have to be thoroughly English and have our *crêpes* on Shrove Tuesday instead of *beignets* (doughnuts).

Since then, temperatures have dropped here (we've had a week of temperatures down as low as -17°C at night not rising above zero during the day), though, unlike parts of the UK, we have had only a sprinkling of snow. The wood stove has been lit all-day every day, and we've enjoyed its comfortable glow. Downstairs the water froze in the washing machine pump, for the first time, and trickles of water from the defrosting (deliberately, this time!) freezer have frozen on the tiled floor, making a treacherous surface. (But at least we had no need to find a temporary cold storage area for the freezer contents). Inside the farmhouse a layer of ice has formed in the hall in front of the front door, where the condensation on the glass has run down in the daytime sunshine and then frozen. And John has found it very cold out in his workshop, where he has been making a splendid low table for the television, and a nest of side tables. We've just ordered some roller shutters (electrically operated!), to replace the rotting wooden shutters, which should aid with insulation - winter warmth and summer shade. They'll have to wait

for warmer weather to be installed, though. In quieter moments we have been working our way steadily through books and DVDs acquired over Christmas (we're in the midst of a Danish "Killing" spree at the moment, with the first series). During the cold spell there has also been the annual amateur theatre performance preceded by hearty meal at Saulxures, a pleasant walk on the wooded slopes at Taintrux, and an extremely disappointing meal at a Michelin-recommended restaurant in Turckheim. But now it feels time to sit back for a while and relish the rural tranquillity before our next trip to the UK.

A bientôt!

La chanson du fromage

(sur l'air de Étoile des neiges)

Dans un coin perdu de fromage
Un tout petit asticot
Faisait de la barre fix' en s'tordant les boyaux
Sur une vieille lame de couteau

REFRAIN

Étoile des crèmes
Mon beau camembert
C'est toi que j'aime
Comme dessert
Après le potage
Après les faillots
Roi des fromages
De tous les mets
T'es bien l'plus beau

Il se disait dans son langage
Il me faudrait un jumeau
Nous pourrions vivre dans le livarot
Près de la vieille lame de couteau

REFRAIN

Le ciel entendit sa prière
Et l'on put voir aussitôt
Sortir un à un et au triple galop
Toute une confrérie d'asticots

REFRAIN

Depuis ce jour dans l'fromage
Plusieurs centaines d'asticots
Font de la barre fixe en s'tordant les boyaux
Autour d'une vieille lame de couteau.