

## **Patchwork: everyday life entre deux pays, December 2013 – April 2014**

An enjoyable part of making a patchwork out of old clothes and fabrics is recalling their colourful heyday. It was a dull February day when I decided to rummage in trunks of old clothes in the Entre-deux-Eaux attics.

Over Christmas we had not only had all the pleasures of time with family and friends but had also embarked on a new phase of life by putting in an offer to buy a *pied-à-terre* back in the UK. We have had our house in France for nearly twenty four years. For the first twelve years it was our holiday house while we were living in Nottingham and working and the children were growing up. For the last twelve years (how quickly time passes!) it has been our full time home and we have loved developing the house and garden and welcoming family and friends. But it is a long way from you all, especially the newest member of the family, three-year old Jacob.

Over autumn we'd scanned Rightmove for the properties for sale in Letchworth Garden City where Toby, Stella, and Jacob are now well settled. The idea was to continue to live in Entre-deux-Eaux, but to spend more time in the UK, without continually imposing on long-suffering friends and family. We were initially attracted by an old lodge on the outskirts of Letchworth. Sensibly on one floor with an attractive looking garden and plenty of character, what could be more "us"? But when we looked round it just before Christmas it turned out to be miles from the shops, the country lane was very busy and noisy, the garden a pocket handkerchief and the interior dark and poky. So, continuing to bear in mind future mobility, we next looked at two conventional bungalows. The first John disliked, and the second, although Jacob liked the toys under a bed (and his judgement was also swayed by the Hogwarts metal train the owner gave him), I hated. The Garden City Heritage Foundation has imposed strict restrictions on altering the outside appearance of houses from the road, which has resulted in bungalows extended at the rear, leaving a room at the centre with no windows, just an overhead skylight, which feels very imprisoning. Quite by chance we saw in the window of a small estate agents a 1912 bungalow which had been permitted (in a laxer planning era) to extend upwards, and we liked the light airy feeling when we looked round it. Our offer was accepted.

Back home in the New Year there was that horrible uncertain period of waiting while the owners began the hunt for a house they wanted to move to. Paper searches were progressing and lists received of furniture and fittings being left, but it still felt as if nothing much was happening. We started thinking about furniture and curtains that we don't use here or which would look better there. The recently re-vamped armchairs which John made for our first house were obvious candidates and we later added a small table of my mother's. John decided to strip my mother's oak bureau that has never found a space here but has been languishing in the workshop, and I altered our very first curtains (1970 Heals "Automation" design by Barbara Brown which is now, it seems, museum material, desirable and expensive retro-chic). Those first curtains had started off in the sitting room at Blenheim Drive, transferred to

the sitting room at Brendon Road, been demoted to our bedroom at Second Avenue, then consigned to a box in the attic in Entre-deux-Eaux as we have shutters at all the windows. John was most apprehensive when I wielded the scissors to cut out the sun-faded sections at the edges. But it was this very act of vandalism which prompted the idea of the Letchworth Quilt and unleashed so many memories of our life together so far.

The curtain colours are purple, crimson, pink, grey, and cream. The downstairs Letchworth bedroom, which is the only room where they left no curtains or blinds, has two purple walls. Now, much of the décor is not to our taste, with its flowery walls and naff beading panels. But it has all been very carefully, lovingly and recently papered and painted and it may be some time before we impose our own taste throughout. So, on that grey February day, I rummaged in the trunks for fabric to match the fragments of purple, crimson, pink, grey and cream curtains that had been salvaged.

Imagine yourself back in the early seventies with long-haired bearded men in bright shirts, flared corduroy trousers and kipper ties, and wild-haired women in Laura Ashley smocks. Had I the heart to cut up that purple corduroy smock with the dark flower print? The bleach stain which defaced the front convinced me. What about the crimson check shirt of John's (what ties did he wear with that)? And that plain mauve shirt would look good. Here is that long grey smock with white flowers (it must have been Laura Ashley too) that I loved drifting around in, and some cheap silver-thread Indian dresses from out travels. Oh yes, those all-in-one dungarees had been fashionable back then and the dark blue cord will tone in. And weddings - here's the long puffy sleeved pink flowered dress I'd made when I was a bridesmaid and later cut down to a mini dress. Sadly for a quilt of memories, Toby and Leila wore out most of their clothes, but there are still some unused bits of Clothkits (did you too sew those pre-printed fabric kits? Some of us were addicted to them). And this one pair of Leila's cord dungarees with smiley crimson cats on still has usable sections. How about a bit of colour contrast and a turquoise shirt of John's - oh and that grey one with crimson stripes has just the right shades. And there's some ribbed cream fabric left from making some blinds for the windows here (IKEA for a change) and some grey cord trousers that look hardly worn. And from the eighties a couple of richly printed crimson, dark blue and green swirling Monsoon dresses. I loved those, they always felt special. A table was cleared in the attic, fabrics washed and draped around, and cutting began.

Was anything else happening here? Winter is always a quiet time in the Vosges, with animals and people tucked up indoors behind their shutters, so there is never much news to relate. There had been the usual Mayor's lunch for the over 65s on our return from the UK, complete with accordion and castanets; writer Hugo Boris talking about his latest book on *Trois grands fauves*, the powerful trio of Danton, Victor Hugo, and Winston Churchill; Roger and Dorinda's farewell visit as they completed the sale of their Anould house (though, as it is being turned into a *gîte* they may well go back and stay there occasionally!), a tasty fish lunch at the *Trois Poissons* on the quay at Little

Venice in Colmar (elegantly restored after a fire had gutted the upper storeys); and pleasant walks on sunny days. But it has to be said that the major local excitement as spring approached was the issue of new dustbins and the choice of a new mayor.

The old pace and style of life here has been shaken up by the local government re-organisation into unwieldy clumps of communes. The idea is to reduce the tiers of administration as Entre-deux-Eaux becomes linked with 18 other communes, including Plainfaing, the largest. The issue of dustbins is part of the new efficient inter-communal rubbish disposal; they are not just bog-standard council dustbins, but lockable ones, which will be weighed each Thursday before being emptied. You may remember that we had an aggressive local meeting before Christmas to “discuss” their introduction and the need to recycle more efficiently. While we were away over Christmas the new yellow plastic bags for paper, tins and plastic had been issued, and we were invited to proceed to the *Salle* on 26<sup>th</sup> February to collect our new numbered and labelled dustbin. The distribution was presided over by the outgoing mayor, a council employee and two others (rather over-kill as there was no-one else there when we went in the late afternoon, and a huge number of yet-to-be collected bins). Buried in some of the newer documentation was mention of a ban on bonfires of “green” waste with the threat of a 400€ fine. So no more garden rubbish/wood fires; it is all meant to go to the tip. But for Entre-deux-Eaux inhabitants that is a 20km round trip, assuming you have a car/trailer. Garden fire smoke is still seen occasionally and I’m sure a lot more waste will be burnt on wood heating stoves to reduce the dustbin weight (and future charges) so, given the number of houses that are already burnt down each year, the number of insurance claims will surely rise.

Sadly we were to miss the local elections, in which we are entitled to vote, as the completion date on our Letchworth house was a couple of days before the first round of French voting. We had been led to think that a retired inspector of schools was likely to be the next mayor, and in due course we received from him a printed list of candidates headed *Liste d'interet communal*, which stated that none of the outgoing councillors or deputies wished to stand, announced their objectives for *continuité* and *nouvelle dynamique*, and included in its candidates our neighbour Claudine (now happily married to another of our neighbours, Gerard). The outgoing mayor was also happy to act in an advisory capacity to ensure stability. We were therefore rather surprised to receive a second piece of paper (this time green) the week before the elections headed *Ensemble pour Entre-deux-Eaux* for a rival team headed by retired farmer and former deputy mayor Dominique Duhaut (some of you may remember his cows ambling past our house to his milking parlour in the early days, with Farmer Duhaut plus stick on his motorbike behind them). It would be interesting to know what had gone on behind the scenes to produce this late flurry. As you vote for named candidates rather than parties, the result was the election of a mixed bag of the “communal interest” and “togetherness” groups, including Claudine but excluding the retired school inspector and the former mayor. That first council meeting must have been interesting. Alas for his dignity, I'm afraid that we shall be referring to

Dominique as the Mary rather than mayor. On our return from our house purchasing, I had some tedious signing and stamping of anti-money-laundering ID documents with authorisation written in English, so on Friday took them down to the *mairie* for signature. The new incumbent was looking harassed with all the unfamiliar French paperwork to come to grips with (odd as he'd been deputy mayor for many years), so a request to also write in English was not popular and in his haste he miscopied my carefully written-out wording and transferred the Mary in my name to his occupation as well. Good old Mary Duhaut.

In Saint Dié too there will be big changes with a youthful UDF mayor replacing the socialist media-hogger and dominating our unfortunate neighbouring communes of Mandray, Saulcy-sur-Meurthe, Saint Leonard, Anould and others in *their* new inter-communal grouping.

But while all this was going on in and around Entre-deux-Eaux, we had removed all but the front two seats from Bluto and filled it with two armchairs, a canvas chair, a small table, boxes of crockery and cutlery, garden tools, DIY tools, sewing machine, linen, towels, curtains, pots, pans and a few clothes and set out to complete our house purchase. March 21<sup>st</sup> was a difficult day for our vendors, with their initial removal van being too small and needing replacing, two slow apprentice removers, and Kevin somehow breaking a back tooth and waiting painfully during the morning for an emergency dental appointment in Letchworth. We lurked in Wilkos and David's bookshop and coffee bar for as long as we could, having been told at 11am the house was officially ours but we shouldn't expect the keys until 1pm, but retreated, defeated, to Toby and Stella's. But by late afternoon we had the keys and were able to unload Bluto.

I don't think we are noted for our impulsive purchasing, but during the next week we scoured the emporia of Letchworth, Welwyn Garden City, Stevenage, Milton Keynes and even Coventry with the result that in addition to the three chairs and small table, our new house now has two double beds and mattresses, one sofa bed, pillows, duvets, eight dining chairs, a washing machine, a fridge/freezer, and a dish-washer; and two sofas are on order. Toby and Stella have lent us a small dining table until we get a bigger one and several of Stella's striking abstract oil paintings which make the house look much more lived-in. It has to be said that Jacob was not initially impressed by our furnishings - where were the essential television, blanket, toys, carrots, biscuits and bananas? John's sister Ann and Derek came up that first weekend, bearing gifts of simnel cake and ginger biscuits. Having carefully examined the ginger chunks in the biscuits, Jacob pronounced them most satisfactory, then discovered the simple outdoor pleasure of throwing daisies in the pond and fishing them out again (hours of closely supervised fun). The following weekend Leila came to join us at Toby and Stella's and while our hosts did some driving practice for Stella and John laboured, Leila and I spent a glorious sunny Saturday morning playing in the park with Jacob. On Sunday amid huge bunches of Mother's Day flowers and fragrant Sanctuary potions for our new bathroom, Stella cooked a huge roast and we opened a bottle of Crémant

d'Alsace and celebrated Mothers and New Houses in style. That evening we slept in one of our new beds and the next morning had breakfast on our borrowed table, and felt *chez nous*. It was only a brief ten-day visit, but we felt we had achieved a lot.

Back in Entre-deux-Eaux it was the usual round of washing (the new Letchworth washing machine had required John to do some re-plumbing, as had the dish-washer) and a medical appointment, and we spent an interesting evening in the *Salle* hearing (mainly from the ex-school inspector) about events in 1914 in Entre-deux-Eaux. France is, like the UK but probably not Germany, reflecting extensively this year on the First World War. The inspector had prepared a slide show, which also had captions which were useful if one couldn't hear everything he said. The mayor of Entre-deux-Eaux in 1914 had been deported by the Germans, suspected of spying and signalling to French troops, and his grandson was present and spoke movingly about the victims of war. At the start of the war, in August 1914, Entre-deux-Eaux was invaded by the Germans. However they did not succeed in penetrating further to attack Paris, but were beaten back to the top of the Vosges where they largely remained for the rest of the war as they became more pre-occupied with the north of France. However in that short time many of the buildings in the village were burnt or destroyed, and French and German soldiers were buried in makeshift graves in the fields around us. A former journalist read extracts from war journals of the fighting on the hills around. The young men of Entre-deux-Eaux were fighting elsewhere, and one of the contributors had prepared a map showing where the villagers listed on the war memorial had died. The mother of our new Mary said afterwards that her son found it all so boring that he fell asleep (but was he making a point about his rival?); however he roused himself to mumble a speech of thanks at the end.

After that excitement, we packed for a week in the south of France with Ann and Derek. As we had when we stayed previously in Antibes with Toby and Stella a couple of years before, we flew from Basel to Nice, but this time turned left rather than right along the coast and took the train to Beaulieu-sur-Mer. Ann and Derek had rented a stylish and well-equipped flat very close to the sea. After our busy ten days in Letchworth, it was pleasant to relax for a week (especially as John was nursing a nasty hacking cough following the cold he'd had before we went to Letchworth) and walk along the coastal paths, explore some mediaeval hill villages on the escarpment behind the coast and see some of Cocteau's art. Around Antibes we had immersed ourselves in Picasso, his ceramics and his unappealing chapel decoration. Cocteau's chapel in Villefranche-sur-Mer was much more attractive and thoughtful (incidents from St Peter's life). And the Cocteau Museum in Menton had a fascinating special exhibition on Picasso, Cocteau and Matisse which we all enjoyed. We agreed that even if the Riviera was not our area of choice, it had provided us with a good break.

And now, back in Entre-deux-Eaux, we are trying to get the garden and vegetable plot sorted out before we return shortly to the UK for about four

weeks in May and June. And hot off the press, this morning our new Mary's first two communiques were delivered: the first concerns dustbins (what else?) and the second the drawing-up of the Entre-deux-Eaux *Carte Communale* which among other things will extend the areas of permitted construction. This could be interesting as we are currently in an area where new building is not allowed and also where, as John cynically observed, the new Mary owns or rents quite a bit of terrain which could be profitable if constructable. So another interesting and no doubt noisy public meeting before we leave for the UK.

Although Entre-deux-Eaux remains our main home, we are looking forward to spending more time back in the UK than we have done in recent years, and we do hope that you will come and see us in our more accessible home. We'll continue to update you on our visits. So provided you can make allowances for differently-tasteful wallpaper, do ring up and make the detour to see us in Letchworth as well as continuing to make the longer journey to Entre-deux-Eaux, where you are equally welcome.