

## **Entre-trois-pays: Letchworth, Entre-deux-Eaux and The Hague. May - July 2014**

At the beginning of May, as we prepared to leave Entre-deux-Eaux for Letchworth, we busied ourselves with sowing seeds and setting up the trickle-feed watering system. (Sadly the weather didn't co-operate and we returned a month later to find the water tank empty and a total of two bean plants, two beetroot, shrivelled peas, a row of broad beans, a tub of marigolds and lots of weeds not to mention some very long grass in the meadow).

Having changed the car tyres from winter snow to summer, sorted out our French income and wealth tax submission and enjoyed an early birthday meal at the Frankenbourg, it was time to load up Bluto with items for the Letchworth house. This time they included my mother's 1930s dark-stained oak bureau (which John had stripped and refinished to pale oak). And, given how much we had to take and how little space there was in Bluto (even though we had removed all except one of the rear passenger seats), into the bureau went sheets, towels, pillowcases and even a hover mower and its grass collector; round it went all the other essentials like pictures and posters, toys (including a large toy tractor and trailer), sewing machine and tools. On the roof rack a double-extending ladder and step ladder were strapped.

It was just as well that the ladders were firmly fixed as we set out on a very windy day and the ladders whistled and hummed as we drove across France. Feeling the need for a break, we had a brief pause for lunch at Reims IKEA (as a prelude to IKEAs across the channel). After a rougher than usual crossing the ferry was eased into Dover harbour by a tug, presumably to avoid damage to the berth. The sun shone on an idyllic Kentish countryside (so sad about the baby rabbit that darted out of the hedgerow), and the fish and chips at Broadstairs were good.

Next day we drove on to Billericay to see Ann and Derek, delayed only by John's sudden urge to finish reading the Biggles story I was about to lend Ann, which was an exciting wartime yarn set in the area above Monte Carlo that we'd all enjoyed exploring a few weeks earlier. And then a reception committee of Toby and Jacob came up to welcome us back to our Letchworth house (once we'd unloaded).

IKEA on a wet Sunday in Milton Keynes was a bad idea, but with single-mindedness we managed to stock up on pillows, a second duvet, a selection of duvet covers and sheets as well as the by now very familiar Billy shelving units (oak - the selection of wood finishes in the UK is more limited than in France). Richer Sounds by the station was much quieter (as well as smaller) and we added a Panasonic TV, Humax Freesat box and Sony Blu-ray/DVD player to the day's haul. Jacob enjoyed helping John to build the shelves on our return, not to mention making railway tracks, stations and bridges with all the cardboard packaging.

Cambridge, as my birthday treat, was much more agreeable, even if it too was

wet and we did spend a lot of time in John Lewis looking at vacuum cleaners, dining tables and curtain fabric. John also bought me a birthday smart phone. On our return Jacob was bursting to sample the birthday cake before bedtime and present a large bouquet; and Stella had cooked a tasty bourguignon.

Over the next few days, Jacob began to expect a new box to unpack every day as Amazon books, a cool box and the vacuum cleaner were delivered. We also got a land line phone and broadband. Then we were ready for our first overnight visitor. The sun shone as Jessica drove up en route to our train-gang reunion in Norwich; she took one look at our garden, and got down on her hands and knees to weed steadily (the perfect guest!) as John erected a washing line “whirlygig” and Jacob fished in the pond and rode his tractor.

Norwich was hot and sunny, and, despite all the train delays experienced by the others, was a lovely place to stay. We caught up on each others' lives, looked round old flint churches and the cathedral (everyone being resigned by now to my second-hand book forays, I was really pleased with the old children's books I found) and we spent an enjoyable day at the Jacobean Blicking Hall. The unexpected highlight for us all was a sensational and imaginative Northern Ballet production of “A Midsummer Night's Dream”, which kept us laughing and marvelling for the rest of our stay. Jessica and I also enjoyed Wymondham village and Grimes Graves during our drives to and from Norwich while the others struggled with delayed trains.

It has been so nice to find that Letchworth has been “on the way” for so many friends. Our next visitors were Ann and David, returning from Brighton. It was just a shame that the two sofas and the dining room table they'd hoped to help us unpack arrived after they had left (providing more good boxes for Jacob). From the moment the legs were on the table, John made me and all subsequent visitors over the Bank Holiday weekend play the “can you spot the mark?” game. As no one else could see anything too bad, he eventually decided to accept the discount John Lewis had offered and to keep the table. I promptly covered it with curtain and lining fabric to make new dining room curtains.

The fine weather was an incentive to acquire garden furniture. It got a bit cool as we forced our next visitors, Roger and Dorinda, to have coffee outside, but it was perfect for sitting outside when Sue and Alistair stopped on their way between Cambridge and London. And we really know how to entertain our visitors, - the highlight of their visit was a trip to a large, cheap hardware emporium that John had just discovered. When Barbara and Bruce drove up from Winchester, we did not subject them to hardware, but they did have to listen to the sad tale of our cracked windscreen replacement: the previous day, in pouring rain, Autoglass had fitted the new front windscreen, and only when trying to fit the windscreen scuttle had they realised that windscreens for right-hand drive and left-hand drive Avensis Versos are mirror images!

Following Alistair's pond inspection, our next shopping trip involved a drive down ever narrowing lanes, past village pubs and thatched cottages (one

forgets that jigsaw puzzle England still exists) to a pond plant specialist. We wandered between greenhouses and outdoor tanks as the nice lady fished us out a selection of oxygenating plants and water snails. Jacob was summoned to help John plant the pond, as we wanted him to understand why he couldn't "fish" in it any more.

And now that Jacob was familiar with house and garden, we had planned a last week of overnight stays for him (while Toby took Stella away for her birthday and then while Stella was away in London painting murals for children's bedrooms). We started with a pre-birthday dinner for Stella and Toby; Jacob arrived in his red and white pyjamas, a large red cap, wellies and jewellery, which he considered an appropriate dinner party outfit. And so began a week of smaller concerns, like Little Kickers, pirate ships, biking round and round fountains, slides, making cakes with grandpa, animal stickers with Leila and that evergreen story, "Peepo", punctuated with Hitchin Collectors' Market with Leila and Stevenage hospital with Toby.

At the end of that week Leila returned with us to Entre-deux-Eaux and we spent a hot, pleasant and restful week at flea markets, playing games of Ticket to Ride (building train routes across Europe) and Yahtzee, watching World Cup games and lunching out at Parc Carola. We had last been to that restaurant at the end of the rather wet week of my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations; this time we sat outside, under the shade of the trees and parasols, with a view across to the roof-top Ribeauville swimming pool. On Leila's last day, Entre-deux-Eaux and Anould laid on flea markets for her and we found more colourful Moroccan plates to hang in her small but lush back garden with all its yellow and blue pots and blue fence.

Despite Autoglass promises to get a correct windscreen fitted before we drove back it was left to Carglass, the Autoglass company in France, to finally fit the correct windscreen (now at a cost to our insurance of €750 rather than the original £350 quote - but they did give us a set of "free" windscreen wipers).

After that it was back to our everyday Entre-deux-Eaux preoccupations with weeding, mowing, sowing, football, slug pellets, and internet speed (our connection has been very variable this year, dropping from a usual 2Mb to slower than dial-up), interspersed with John making coffee tables and a TV unit for Letchworth, and my continuing the patchwork quilt. You won't be surprised to read that there were a few restaurant trips as well. We went on one of our shopping expeditions over the Rhine and had lunch in a pretty wine village in the hills, Oberbergen. The restaurant was above a very modern wine producer, and we entered through the displays of wine bottles and up a staircase between the stainless steel fermenting vats and sat on a terrace overlooking the hills with incongruous but picturesque hens foraging and defecating below the tables. The end-of-term trip for the Entre-deux-Eaux oldies was to a restaurant with aspirations, the Julien, on the main road to Strasbourg. My first memory of that restaurant, when we took my mother for her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, is of seeing a small white dog ensconced at the head of a table on a pile of cushions on a Louis XV chair. This time there were no dogs,

just noisy pensioners. Afterwards we were graciously allowed to walk round the grounds, though not to use the hotel's sauna, gym or swimming pools. The meal at another restaurant was much heartier (and tastier), a typically cruder Vosgian meal at the Auberge Habeaurupt in the valley that runs from Plainfaing to Gérardmer. It started with a huge salad, continued with a large plate of veal, included the (fast-vanishing from menus) traditional cheese course (local Munster and Brie) and concluded with a large pudding with lashings of cream and then coffee. Afterwards we stopped in Fraize to see a small historical exhibition on local industries (in fact just two, the Gantois woven mesh/perforated plate factory in Saint Dié and a glass-making village near Epinal). And for a bit more culture there was a book talk at the library and a talk on Saint Dié in August 1914 at the museum.

And then we began to feel restless and decided, very much on the spur of the moment, to take a short break. Some time ago we had watched with interest the BBC4 Andrew Graham-Dixon programme on the re-opening of the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum, and John had also noted the Mauritshuis in the Hague had only just re-opened. It must be about fifty years since I went to the art museums of Amsterdam and Rotterdam with Jessica, and the last of John's conference trips to the Netherlands must have been at least twenty years ago. We booked a room in a lovely boutique hotel in The Hague; it was an 1890s town house which a couple had lovingly modernised and decorated in restful shades of black, grey and cream. We had a very spacious stylish room with a balcony overlooking the quiet street and an en suite bathroom that was almost as large. Our host sorted out a parking permit and a tram/train/bus card (like a London Oyster card), and was happy to advise on restaurants and museums. The first evening we were pleased to find that Alan and Marianne (together with daughter Tessa) were back in nearby Delft, where Alan has been working. So we caught a tram to Delft, wandered round the lovely old town with its canals and market square, met up with them and Marianne's parents and a colleague of Alan's on the steps of the town hall and trooped off to track down that local delicacy, the first mussels of the season.

The next day, Tuesday, after a good breakfast, we caught a tram into town and walked through the Parliament buildings to the Mauritshuis Museum, a small palace with a delicate façade like a dolls' house. It was a lovely setting for the smaller Dutch interiors and portraits (not to mention the famous Goldfinch and Girl with a Pearl Earring), and we enjoyed seeing some Rembrandts we hadn't seen before (like the Two Moors) as well as some women artists like Clara Peeters, Judith Leyster and Rachel Ruysch (although rather disappointed in all the rooms by the deep shadows of the picture frames cast on some paintings by the otherwise praised natural colour LED lighting). After a stroll in the area round the museum and a coffee in the library (old habits), we decided to go to the very different Escher museum in the afternoon, which is housed in another former palace, although this one is now somewhat seedier. The earlier complex lithographs and woodcuts on the first two floors prior to his "impossible constructions" were equally fascinating, though younger visitors seemed more entranced by the puzzles, games and optical illusions on the third floor.

Returning along a narrow street of shops and restaurants between the tram stop and our hotel, we spotted some early Penguin novels in a box outside a second hand bookshop. Lured inside, we edged our way round what would be Jessica and Ellen's worst nightmare - precarious stacks of books on all subjects and in all languages; the shelves had some order to them, but were double- and triple-stacked too. Our tourist souvenirs that day consisted of two Penguins and two library shoulder bags (a bargain at 15 cents each). That evening we ate a rijsttafel at a small but packed Indonesian restaurant a few streets from our hotel.

On the Wednesday we caught the train to Amsterdam (admiring the Art Nouveau station buildings at Haarlem as we passed through). Fortunately, despite all the gloomy predictions and the need to pre-book, we didn't have to queue to get into the refurbished Rijksmuseum, and though the usual suspects like the Night Watch and the Vermeers attracted throngs, other rooms were quieter.

But for the sheer pleasure of examining exhibits in a spacious, airy, art deco (1935) building with no-one else in sight, the Gemeentemuseum back in The Hague the following morning won hands down. We wandered through lavishly decorated Indonesian rooms, into Delft pottery, through Little Red Riding Hood, up to a fascinating exhibition of Mondrian and de Stijl (with furniture, paintings, videos and maquettes), into the café, on to their summer exhibition (inspired by the Royal Academy's summer show) and finally the visually stunning Wonderkamers in the basement (though we didn't borrow a tablet for the interactive displays). After such an intense experience we decided to take the tram to the sea at Scheveningen. But, instead of the fresh sea breezes over the dunes or fish stalls round the harbour, we found crowded beaches and cafés, and, after a very hot stroll along a promenade that could equally well been at Blackpool or Margate, were glad to rest our feet and recover with Italian ice cream. In the evening we ate at an Italian restaurant that our fellow-guests had recommended. The antipasto platter alone would have made a meal, and when I ordered a limoncello at the end, a delicious slice of gâteau was thrown in as well.

It was a mistake to take to the roads back to Entre-deux-Eaux on a July Friday as the traffic frequently came to a standstill with the combination of lorries, south-bound holiday traffic, road works and accidents at temperatures of 35 degrees. What a contrast with our drive north which had been through heavy rain, though when the rain eased, we had turned off the motorway and followed the River Moselle as far as Trier. Barbara and Bruce had been enthusiastic about their stay among the Roman remains there. We looked round the Porta Negra, the hideously baroque cathedral, the stark re-constructed Constantine's basilica (now an austere protestant church) and then the rain descended in sheets and everyone ran for shelter. We eventually abandoned the rain-soaked amphitheatre and Roman baths and retreated to our pleasant hotel on the cliff above Trier. We had an early dinner in the hotel and prepared to watch the Germany v. Argentina final. We had feared that a

night in Germany after the match could be very noisy and we were pleasantly surprised that we were not disturbed that night. Outside a wine cellar we had been rather taken with a stone Roman wine ship as it captured the enjoyment of exploration we were feeling at the start of our short break.

Entre-deux-Eaux seemed very tranquil on our return. The weeds have of course grown in our short absence, the maize planted in the north field seems also to have shot up, and the blueberries in our fruit cage are abundant (so we can ignore the oddly Anglo-French sign in Saulcy to *self-cueillette* blueberries). A couple of days after our return we drove over the hills to Wolfisheim near Strasbourg and had a pleasant, leisurely lunch with Marie-Laure and Christian, who had previously shown some of us round Fort Kleber.

And now our thoughts are turning to Letchworth again. John has just booked our ferry and we are contemplating assorted piles of coffee tables, TV unit, cylinder mower, hedge trimmer, books, loudspeakers, fluorescent lights, TV (we brought the new one back to France), boxes of fabrics, tools, as well as wine, etc. and thinking about what will fit in the car this time - as we want to put in several rear seats. Do come and see us there if you are around during August, - especially as we now have a dining table and some sofas!