

Gallivanting in the UK and lying low in Entre-deux Eaux: October - December 2017

There must be a lot of restaurateurs in the south of England, who were wishing that we had vacated their tables more rapidly in October. Having good restaurants around us in France, we don't usually eat out frequently in the UK. However this October was an exception and we visited quite a few towns and villages we didn't know, experiencing them mainly through their pubs and restaurants as we caught up with friends and family.

West Hoathly in Sussex may well have an eleventh century church and a Priest House, but it was to the sixteenth century Cat Inn that we repaired on our first full day back in the UK at the beginning of October, for a good, protracted and noisy (other clients, not us!) lunch and exchange of news with Roger and Dorinda, before driving on to Jessica and Mark's in Putney.

The following day, John set off for Letchworth for a spot of hard labour with Alistair, installing loft flooring and a new garden shed roof, while Helen and Jessica joined the rest of the train gang for a few days of annual reunion in a cottage outside Wells. The village has developed from the amazing Gothic revival Somerset and Bath Pauper Lunatic Asylum designed by Sir Gilbert Scott. Perhaps an appropriate place for four chattering seventy-plus-year-old school girls. The train gang usually includes a National Trust property, a Cathedral, a good walk, a restaurant and a lot of chat. So the first day started at Lytes Carey Manor, with a warm up in the Tea Room after the Arts and Crafts garden, followed by a tour of the great hall and rooms, and then further refreshments and reminiscence in the crowded Tea Room. The second day involved a walk up Glastonbury Tor or round Bath, and the third day took in the weekly food market in Wells, a lingering lunch overlooking the Cathedral then evensong in the Cathedral, during which the rain could be heard above the singing as it whipped against the cathedral windows; as the train gang left, reminiscing about those long-ago school commemoration services in Canterbury Cathedral, they were greeted by a rainbow arching over the cathedral.

Jacob has settled well into his new school in Leicestershire, and is getting good reports. Leicestershire has different school holidays from Hertfordshire, so Farrah was at school while Jacob was staying with Toby, and we saw plenty of him. Leila was also able to stay with us for part of that week. In fact she brought Jacob down with her and arrived for Sunday lunch just as John's sister Ann and Derek (bearing food) arrived and we were joined by their sons, Steven and David, with their partners, Helen and Amy, and children, Theo and Sammy. It was one of those delightful, noisy and hectic afternoons with loud chatter and quacking (yes, the duck game was back). Barbara and Bruce were much quieter mid-week lunch guests. And even Rye-Assic Adventure Park seemed very quiet, tucked away on the edge of an industrial estate with only toddlers visiting in term-time, so, after a quick scamper round and a hot chocolate, we ignored the dinosaurs and finished with a competitive Blackmore game of crazy golf.

The following week we resumed our table-hogging, meeting up over beer, wine and lunch in Harpenden with one of John's school chemistry boys, Graham, and Julia. Fortunately the restaurant was not too busy and we lingered till our parking expired, catching up on those retirement pursuits of travel, grandchildren and children's books. We had a nostalgic return to Nottingham, staying on the much changed university campus, walking round Wollaton Park with its rutting stags and golden oaks, having coffee with Ann and Michael in Staffordshire (with the added bonus of the scenery and bookshops of Derbyshire as we returned) and again with Sue and Alistair, and celebrating John's birthday with Leila over a seven-course taster menu at the recently opened Alchemilla restaurant. On our second evening in Nottingham we drove down to the meadows by the River Trent where John used to play cricket with the UKCIS staff and where Sat Bains has since established a highly rated (two Michelin stars) restaurant.

John had long wanted to eat there, but had wondered whether to cancel after seeing recent reviews and photographs. But we were so glad he didn't. We arrived at the isolated building at what seemed a very early hour of 18.30, but we needed the time to fully savour the ten-course taster menu and paired wines. The Burgundian sommelier was a mine of information about his unusual wines and the young waiter was interested in discussing the herbs we didn't recognise and later proposed a tour round the greenhouses at the end of our meal. We were also invited into the busy kitchen where Sat Bains chatted and inscribed birthday greetings across John's menu. By the time we reached the last course, the conclusion, an unusual candy floss with thai curry filling, served on a glass topped tray displaying the curry ingredients, it was refreshing to find that there was no second sitting waiting impatiently for our table, - but, when we looked at our watches, time had passed and it was far too late for a second sitting. It all felt very individual and special.

Unlike this focus on food and sharing of information in an atmosphere of unhurried appreciation and muted conversation (no raucous shouts and life histories from other tables), when we met up with Val in St Albans at Brasserie Blanc, it felt as if our waiter was more keen to get our food over and table cleared (despite empty tables round us) than to encourage our animated chat about food, mothers, houses (in France and in London) and frescoes. So, it was back to Letchworth to pack up our book and food purchases and clothes ready for our departure next day.

Not that we reached France the next day as there were more leisurely meals to enjoy en route. First we parked the loaded Snowy south of the Thames in Battersea and looked for the interestingly named Fish in a Tie where Ellen was hosting her seventieth birthday lunch. The tiny restaurant and bar was buzzing with diners, but two long tables on a mezzanine floor had been set aside for Ellen's guests. She had left the USA many years ago (was it just to see the Beatles?), worked as a children's librarian and married David, one of Helen's friends from Library School. Over bottles of wine and Italian food, we met family and friends from across her subsequent years in the UK. A very

congenial and protracted gathering, from which we drove in the dark to Ann and Derek's in Tenterden. This attractive Kentish village was to provide us next morning with a goodly haul of second-hand books and bottles of the beer that John had enjoyed over lunch in Harpenden. In the afternoon we set out for Sue's in Dymchurch, pausing near Ashford to look round the 13th century Sevington church whose steeple we'd spotted earlier. The man who arrived on his bicycle to lock up was a prominent member of the small group who led their own worship there each Sunday, vicarless and "like the early church", and also of the Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch railway, he told Helen as John wandered round taking photographs. On a side chapel wall there still hung a war time certificate awarded by the Royal Airforce Comforts Committee for the Sevington Womens Voluntary Service's work and another presented to the Savings Group in 1943 by the Wings for Victory National Savings campaign. Not items you often see these days on church walls, but the church did feel a bit cut off in time and place by an Ashford bypass road. Our longer-than-usual (and very sociable) visit to the UK finished in style reminiscing with Sue over a tasty chicken tagine about the brief period in the sixties when Helen and Sue shared a flat in London.

However, the next day we found that few things had changed in and around Entre-deux-Eaux while we were away. The maize crop in the field to the north had been harvested, the field ploughed (and soon after a winter crop was sown and the birds descended); the kebaberie at the roundabout in Saulcy, which we had always meant to try, had shut; and the commune had installed a new fire hydrant by John's workshop. Not big changes, though a tree had to be uprooted later to protect the hydrant from entwining roots. So we quickly settled in, picking the remaining autumn raspberries, pruning and tying in the fruit cage, clearing and tidying the potager and storing the reminders of summer (swing, swing seat, benches, bird cage) as well as taking in the last tubs of plants before the winter frost and snow and protecting the peonies and roses. Other activities resumed, like Scrabble, exercise group, the E2E oldies gossip, games and cake monthly meeting, and the annual visit by the community nurse for flu jabs. The nurse was somewhat concerned by John's recent cold, but he shrugged it off; maybe that accounts for the recurring sore throat, coughs and colds that have dogged the days since his return. The driving rain during much of November coupled with coughs and colds have meant that we have passed an uneventful time and have little news, unless you are interested to know we have passed the sewage inspection. Helen has been grateful for the pile of charity books she amassed in October, and John has been experimenting with complex-sounding settings on his birthday camera, while colourful birds like spotted woodpeckers with their flashes of red, nuthatches and tits have obliged by posing on the fat balls and bird seed on the balcony. And, like the UK, we have had December snow.

And now it is nearly time for our return to Letchworth for Christmas. We have enjoyed seeing so many of you during the year, and we wish you all a very happy Christmas and very best wishes for health and happiness in 2018.