

Year 2 Weeks 1 and 2

Strikes and Beer festivals: Everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux

Last week we returned from two weeks in the UK. It was on the same date as we made the Great Move just a year ago. We'd got up and left Broadstairs early with the intention of catching the 7.45a.m. boat and were feeling slightly odd about this, until we turned on the car radio for the 7 a.m. news. This provided us with more serious grounds for unease. We were by then only fifteen minutes from Dover Harbour. The newscaster reported that another French strike over proposed pension changes meant that Calais Harbour was closed until that afternoon (as were French airports). Whilst I had some sympathy with the workers, this was rather a blow, as we needed to be back in Entre-deux-Eaux within 24 hours for those other French workers – the kitchen installers.

We continued the journey to Dover harbour. The sun was shining, the lambs were frolicking on the North Downs, Dover castle looked magnificent against the blue sea – and the lorries were filling up the available quayside waiting lanes. Not many cars in sight, though. Our hearts sank. At the P & O booth, the nice attendant got our booking on screen, smiled and said “Oh. You'll be alright, I'll arrange a voucher for you for the Channel Tunnel. Just return to the travel centre and collect it on your way out”. Amazing! Was this the reward for frequent travellers or for being stockholders (even more bemused as we'd only actually paid £7 for our open-dated return trip, having used up our accumulated motor points – which, in itself was something which has not, for quite a few years, been possible for stockholder rather than full brochure fares) ? We were off like a shot, after passing Go and collecting our voucher, we drove along the cliff top towards Folkestone, and were driving onto a train which edged into the tunnel only 45 minutes after our ferry would have left. It was all very efficient and peaceful. Who remembers the more aggressive strikes with farmers and tractors blockading Calais? (And were those firms with defrosting refrigerated lorries ever finally compensated?)

I think I felt particularly sorry for those striking over pension changes, as we had commenced our return journey on the day that I became a pensioner. (I had hitherto been keeping rather quiet about this, as it sounds so decrepit, especially as John's “occupation” remains “pré-retraité” for quite a few more years). However we had had a celebratory meal in a Birmingham Indian (where else?) with Toby and his girl-friend Hannah and with friends Sue and Alistair. This came at the end of a good week-end in Hay-on-Wye, which was John's birthday indulgence to me. (Though I should point out that during the course of our UK visit, he bought nearly as many cookery books as I bought children's books). Inevitably, John and Alistair had canoed, rather damply, down part of the Wye on the Saturday. I am not keen on camping in the rain, and was glad we'd booked into a picturesque B&B, the Old Post Office in Llanigon, for that night. It was most welcoming. We discovered our key in an envelope in the letterbox, and let ourselves into a crimson dining room with polished floors and a huge oak table invitingly laid with blue and white china. The sitting room had piles of tempting books and interesting pictures. Hot showers after the canoeing seemed a must – though John reported dangerous sliding of the

shower mat across the sloping, highly polished, old oak bathroom floor. Ah, you can't beat Welsh picturesque (this was the winner of the Welsh B&B 2002). In the morning there were ten of us round the huge old table. Vegetarian cooked breakfast came as a bit of a shock to the bacon-fanciers, but I enjoyed the unusual treat of cheese on toast for breakfast! And we found out who owned the French-registered car (not ours!) in the yard – a couple who, having spent five years retirement in France to please the husband, were now looking for a house somewhere in the UK to move to sometime in the next two years to satisfy the wife's desire to be back nearer to family.

Other highlights of our trip were seeing both our mothers in Essex and Nottingham, John's sister's family, Putney friends (another birthday celebration and a trip to the British Museum to see the former library and the Mesopotamian exhibits - before Iraq demands the return of their share?) and Nottingham friends. It was good to see so many people in quite a short time!

The car was laden on our return week, not just with second hand books and various plants. We also bought several large tins of paint for the farmhouse, as English paint comes in more shades and at lower prices than we can buy in France – must be something to do with weight and transport costs. Can we make the farmhouse look as stunning as Llanigon Old Post Office before we start letting it next year?

Our first week back has felt equally busy. Our first impression of the farmhouse was of a green wilderness. It had obviously rained a lot whilst we were away, as potatoes and weeds had thrust through the hitherto bare soil in equal profusion and the "lawn" (as I like to call the bumpy bit of mowed meadow) was knee height (and I'd cut it just before we left). As soon as we'd unloaded the car, we set to work to prepare for the next day's kitchen installation. John had decided to apply a couple of last minute coats of waterproof paint on the plasterboard walls around the proposed work-surface in the kitchen whilst I mowed (yes, with our Flymo!) a path through the long grass to the ramp for easier access for the kitchen installers and their bulky units.

The man and boy arrived around 7.45am the next morning (a slightly early but not abnormal start for French tradesmen), and were so impressed by access provided by the mown "lawn" that they parked on it. They unloaded rapidly and started sawing under John's eagle eyes. Unfortunately while the man was off getting something trimmed at their workshop and John was off buying a gas hob connecting pipe which we assumed had been included in the installation costs, the lad trimmed too much off the back of the oven unit. It will have to be replaced (I'm glad I didn't hear what his senior colleague said to him afterwards!). In fact they seemed to rush through everything – they're the only French workmen we've known who've worked right through the sacred two hour lunch break. We wondered if they wanted the afternoon off (it was a Wednesday) or if they had another afternoon job and were, in fact, taking longer than they'd been allowed. But the work-surface had also been factory pre-cut too long (which must have contributed to the oven casing problem). So poor Muriel at Cuisine Schmidt got another visit from us.

We'd thought it would be rather good timing to get the kitchen installed before this year's only letting (to people who've come at the same time for the previous two years, so are well used to our chaos, as their visit last year coincided with our move). How nice it would to have a real kitchen to cook in this time, rather than camping gas on the balcony! However it was rather a rush to move the kitchen, clean the farmhouse, clear the terrace (they like sitting out there, whatever the weather), rebuild the barbecue, and mow a further "lawn" area for them all in a day and a half. And of course they arrived early, but affably allowed themselves to be diverted by a cup of tea on our balcony and a shopping trip to Cora whilst we completed our clean-up (and even returned with a bunch of flowers to brighten our sitting room as an apology for their early arrival)! However we've since discovered that in our haste we've left them without vital items for "la vie française" like a coffee maker.

After all this hard work, by the time Sunday arrived we were ready for some light entertainment in the form of vide-greniers. It was another wet day, so we decided to head for Turkheim in Alsace. This is one of the quaint old mediaeval walled villages. It also possesses a wine-making co-operative and a manufacturer of cast iron casseroles (Staub) which we frequent. Despite the weather, the intrepid stall-holders were well supplied with awnings, umbrellas, and sheets of plastic. But, because of the rain affecting trade, we were able to haggle and get things for about half the asking price. We found some rather unusual patterned iron ware which looked North African, though one stall-holder assured us it was typical Alsatian. So I'm now sitting looking at two enormous decorated iron jugs and a large three-legged cauldron or cooking pot reposing on our tiled floor. The next village was smaller and less prepared for the weather and most of the stalls had given up gone home. However, back over the hills at Xonrupt-Longuemur, stalls were rallying in the short bursts of sunshine, and we sat down there for lunch at our favourite merguez (spicy north African sausage) and frites stall. The next stop turned out to be a small craft fair rather than a flea market, but John spotted a sign to a beer festival in the next village so we headed there up and down hill along a long, straight road only really wide enough for one car.

St Michel-sur-Meurthe is a somewhat larger than Entre-deux-Eaux, and they certainly know how to lay on a good do. There was something for everyone. And everyone was there. It was far more popular than the neighbouring craft fair. It was not just beer. Flea market stalls radiated out from the main square. In the square there were roundabouts and beer stalls. Outside the Mairie a couple of girls on the back of a lorry were singing their hearts out - and they were good. Up the hill from the Mairie there was more beer.

And how do inebriated Frenchmen behave on a festive village Sunday afternoon? Well, the older men, when not involved in animated discussion, seemed to favour the (local?) French equivalent of the coconut shy. This consisted of empty wine bottles (on tree trunks, at about thigh level, some distance away) at which you had to throw heavy boules. This required measured concentration, refocusing of bleary eyes, and two or three minutes of swinging of arms, whilst fending off comments from onlookers, followed by launching a boule which landed with a dull thud well short of the target.

Earlier in the day, less inebriated contestants must have hit the target, if the quantity of broken glass was an indication. There was no notice about a prize, and, since no-one got anywhere near any of the bottles whilst we watched, we were none the wiser as to what, other than glory, the contestants would gain for their euro expenditure on three throws.

Meanwhile, outside the fire station, ten of the younger men were involved in an inflated bar-football contraption. This was about the size of a quarter of a tennis court with chest-high inflated walls. Strapped by the wrists to the metal bars across the pitch (and with belt straps as well just in case they managed to work their hands free) the team members were lunging in unison across the court, this way, then that, trying to block goal shots, or kick the football forward. However, while we were watching, one lunge must have been particularly violent, as they punctured the inflated wall around the "pitch" which deflated the goal at one end over the hapless goalkeeper. Play had to be abandoned for repairs. So we wandered off to look again at the donkey, pony, and goat. The donkey was still for sale (we thought of our farmhouse visitors who have a hilarious story about the vicar's donkey, which is so hilarious that it never gets told). The pony was pulling a trap full of children, who'd taken the goat for a ride too! There's no doubt about it. St Michel's beer festival was well worth a detour and will be on the calendar for next year.!

After that, this week's events have seemed quite tame: the Monday lecture on retaining the purity of the French language by eliminating nasty Americanisms; the Tuesday trip to IKEA, DIY, and electrical stores in Strasbourg to look at microwave combination ovens, kitchen tiles, and shelving, the Wednesday cleaning-up and cooking of lamb tagine and chocolate-and-raspberry tart (essential before sitting down with friends to watch the Celtic-Porto match), and Thursday Keep Fit and Scrabble. For anyone keen to brush up their French, this week's French-Words-We-Never-Learnt-at-School are gnon (a blow, bash), aa (never got to the bottom of that one and it's not in my dictionary - although there is a River Aa near Calais), dey (Algerian functionary), epurge (a plant that's not in my dictionary - perhaps it's a spurge), not to mention fob, kawi, and shit.

On Thursday our dejected visitors, Tina and Kevin, who really love the area by now and would like to buy somewhere of their own, reported that they'd been quite unsuccessful in obtaining details of properties for sale within their price range. All the agencies seemed to be staffed by receptionists who knew nothing about the properties, their location or prices and whose salespeople never rang back. We tried a few phone calls on their behalf and had to echo their perplexity as to how agencies ever manage to sell properties. They went off to try and locate one property somewhere outside a village (with only its photo to help), whilst we made enquiries at the local restaurant-bar. The proprietor didn't know that house, but he did just happen to have the keys for another old house next to the Mairie and would happily show us round. This seemed a far more efficient system than the estate agents! This huge old house had been partly restored by Belgians, but still had masses of work to be done on it (and Tina hated the spiders and horrible smell when she saw it later!). Meanwhile they'd found the first house, which was built into a steep hillside. It had been partly converted into a gite by a now divorced couple, and

might have been habitable in summer time, but we suspected that, judging by the stained walls, it would be far too damp to use during winter. And excavating into the hillside and draining of the rain and snow water would be very expensive. “Ah, the wet house” said the locals in another restaurant/ bar that night. “The water runs off the hillside onto it”. After that, Tina and Kevin and family drowned their sorrows in wine, their best meal ever - and line dancing (all in the same inn!) Today they tried some more agencies, but with no success. We drowned their sorrows this time in cups of tea on the balcony and watched a thunderstorm approach and then drench everything.

Today we went into our builders' merchant to order kitchen tiles. Because we've got an account there, their the salesman (who bears a strong resemblance to Nigel Hawthorne in “Yes Minister”) played with his calculator and arranged a discount of around 25%, which was good. If only we could crack the French methods of finding out the prices of other things - like shelving, kitchens and houses!