

## A Tale of Two Mayors: Everyday Life in Entre-deux-Eaux, Year 7 Weeks 13 - 23

"Ah! *Entre-deux-Eaux*". You have an excellent mayor!" a member of the Saint Dié walking group announced in the middle of the countryside. "*Chaxel*. He used to be a teacher, and he knows everyone."

It was a surprise to hear that our commune of some 450 inhabitants was known in the big world of urban Saint Dié. There the mayor, Pierret, is known by *everyone*, having shaken hands with everyone (and promptly forgotten them) and having ensured his photograph is inserted at least once on every page of the town's monthly newsletter, showing him standing prominently in front of each local group, road improvement, statue and municipal flowerbed. "*How are you?*" he once breathlessly asked me, pumping my hand, while pounding along the corridor of the high-speed train. The train was, at the time, stationary in Saint Dié station where he was publicising to the supposedly-awed citizens his role in enabling the TGV service to be extended to "his" town. He was at the far end of the carriage by the end of his three-word query as to my well-being.

We recently ran into our own mayor in the middle of the forest. He'd been surveying some of his (personal not commune) softwood trees and gloomily assessing how many it would be worth cutting for sale this year. We discussed the economic situation and its disastrous effect on the building trade and timber industry. He told us that the farm we had passed had changed hands recently and that the pretty grey donkeys which had come rushing up in their grey hoods (fly protectors for the eyes) belonged to the new owner. We checked that the forest track we were following still led to some lakes we had seen on the map (as tracks can change with logging requirements). "*Ponds*", he corrected gently, and assured us that the track did indeed lead to them and beyond to the next village. He also warned us that the next day would be a bad day to stroll in the forest as it would be the first day of the hunting season, and we discussed the number of boar and game and the fact that there are now only eight (authorised) huntsmen in the village due to the expense involved. As we walked on, we were sorry to find that we couldn't get near the ponds as they were enclosed by a fence, and the track veered away. And then we spotted some huge wrought iron gates through the trees, - the kind that would usually open onto the drive of an Edwardian mansion. But there was no drive on either side or fine house beyond. What a shame our mayor wasn't still with us to provide information about the mystery gates in the forest.

I doubt if the Mayor of Saint Dié is ever to be seen in the forests around Saint Dié. Presumably he spends most of the week in Paris where he is a lawyer. And after all Saint Dié is rather a small pond for a former Secretary State for Industry. However he was back at the beginning of October with all his academic pals for the International Geography Festival which he has instituted to put Saint Dié (like America) on the map. This was the 19<sup>th</sup> festival, and its theme was (literally and wordily) "*Between wars and conflicts: the planet under tension*". The invited country of honour was Japan. Any connection?

As well as all the worthy visiting academics, the cookery demonstrations predictably included rice (a whole session) and sushi, and the street events included a tea ceremony and a dragon. Japanese drumming in the cloisters was pretty impressive and John enjoyed the koto player in the old church. Meanwhile the local history group recreated a forest trench from World War One beneath the war memorial, and their lectures interpreted the theme broadly, including the conflict between a small village and an encroaching big town (Saint Dié, of course, but the mayor was not there to hear it - he was probably swanning around with the Japanese Consul General and the Japanese Ambassador).

I wonder if there will ever be a 20<sup>th</sup> International Festival of Geography. Mayor Pierret is no doubt a political cousin of Peter Mandelson, having surfaced from previous corruption scandals (the last being the Lyonnaise des Eaux contract bribery allegations). But two days after the Geography Festival closed, the Tribunal Administratif declared the Saint Dié election to have been what *1066 and all that* would have called "*dull and void*". This was due to "*une irrégularité*". Several days before the first round of the elections, the municipality had sent a letter to 600 inhabitants of the social housing in the Kellerman area, promising a repayment of excess rental charges following a successful renegotiation of the heating maintenance contract (and before the company managing the area knew of the decision). In the second round of voting Pierret scraped through by 156 votes. It remains to be seen what happens after an appeal. Meanwhile one of the main items on the Mayor's website (above even the Geography Festival, but below "*My life as a Minister*") remains a video on how to live as both a Christian and a freemason.

Here in Entre-deux-Eaux life continues more quietly. Indeed it has been so peaceful that, for several days in the early evening, young deer were coming out of the forest to graze in the meadow by the stream. We haven't seen them since the hunting season opened, but hope that's due to prudence rather than extinction. The hot air balloon from Saulcy has been able to fly in the pleasant September evenings, and has made a colourful landing in the same meadow. With the better weather, the meadows have had their second cut and all is safely baled and wrapped in pale green plastic and the cows are back grazing the field above the farmhouse. The more distant maize fields have also been cut to provide winter fodder, bringing heavy tractor trailers lumbering up and down our lane to Farmer Duhaut's big new maize store. Our own colourful harvest adorns the windowsills - pumpkins and squash, ready for seasonal soup-making. In the orchard the crows seem to have developed a liking for a walnuts, and deadly fireblight has struck the quince, pear, medlar and some apple trees.

We had a further update on E2E current affairs when the senior commune employee came round, as he always does in September, to read the water meter. We admired the way the one of the village crosses (the one which had allegedly been knocked down by a passing lorry) had been restored with a new bronze statue on its stonework. He also assured us that the cross that had been absent for a number of years from the end of our road would soon be restored again, but said that another one was in store awaiting a decision about what to do with that road junction. So some of our mayor's pre-election

promises are being fulfilled. But the commune employee gave us a very funny look when we asked when our part of the road would, as the mayor had promised, be resurfaced. That had obviously been a vain promise! We should have asked what was happening about the great sewerage debate, as a questionnaire was issued soon after the almost unanimous re-election of our mayor and council.

September has been a fine month, sunny but not too hot, for finding new walks around the commune. First there was the annual village walk (and I still enjoy coming across the refreshment tables along the way. This time the first pit stop was along the track at the top of the field above our house!). Another still day, we came across a young man trying in vain to get his paraglider airborne among the hay bales on a small hill behind the football ground. Across a road and past a farm with a barking dog we came across Bluebeard's mobile clothing and household linen shop parked outside another farm. What a name! It conjured up pictures of a plump farmer's wife opening up the wardrobe within Barbe Bleue's colourful van, never to be seen again.

This year I (but not John, as he is keen to point out) became eligible for the club of the Ancients of E2E. So on the third Thursday of September I went with Danielle Laine and her sister Giselle (the mother of Farmer Duhaut) and got scrutinised by all my fellow-ancients. Our mayor came round to chat with every one, as if he was really pleased to see them all enjoying the gossip and cards together again. The highlight of the afternoon was the birthday cake - or cakes, as there were 4 birthdays. But Danielle was definitely the winner of the best cake accolade. Normally everything in her household has been grown or reared on the premises. So everyone was amazed that this time she had made an exception. She tartly said it was because you only have a 70<sup>th</sup> birthday once. She had commissioned a cake from her favourite baker over in Anould - a glorious éclair and cream confection.

Madame la presidente also encouraged me to join the inter-communal bingo being hosted by the E2E Ancients in October, - only four cards, she decided, as I would struggle with the numbers in French. Alas, with my four cards I failed to stagger home with one of the big prizes - no tumble drier, panel radiator, vacuum cleaner, raclette, TV or hideous bouquet of flowers. And not even a more portable trophy like shopping vouchers, restaurant vouchers, chocolates or a lethal-looking bottle of home-made colourless fruit liqueur. But the prize which had been saved until the end sounded the best: two travel vouchers for 250 euros each for anywhere, anytime. The concentration was intense, punctuated only by a querulous "*What did she say? Twenty six?*" "*No thirty six*" "*That's what I said, twenty six!*" and much irritated shushing. Suddenly there was a squeak right next to me, and Danielle's hand shot up. Entre-deux-Eaux's very own Mme Laine had won the two travel vouchers! She was stunned, and unable to say a word all the way home. I would have loved to have heard Pierre's comments. Having been born in the next village and driven a lorry (probably locally) for the nearby builders' merchants, he has seen quite enough of the world, - and he didn't like Algeria and all its foreigners when he had to do his national service there. I can imagine him suggesting a swap with the tumble drier! Danielle, however, has travelled with Giselle to the Atlantic

coast beyond Bordeaux - nearly Spain, in fact - to visit Giselle's married daughter. So who knows?

Ever since our mayor organised the *gros objets* collection (last newsletter) and John had a major clear-out of his workshop, he has been busy building shelves and fixing storage units and drawers. Finally when John and Wendy were over at the end of August, the two Johns disappeared into the workshop, for John2 (whose own workshop is devoted largely to wood-turning projects) to practice joints with the impressive machinery and for John1 to start work on a bedside cabinet for Leila and a bathroom cabinet for us. Since then he has made another bedside table for the farmhouse, which was christened when Shelagh and Melvin stayed this week.

We did manage to drag the two Johns out for some wet walks and some good meals, a hearty one at the Saint Alexis (with a large party of huntsmen sitting under the awnings outside - wild boar are endemic there and hunting is allowed year-round) and a gourmet one at the Frankembourg. And we also had some sunshine for the Sunday flea-markets, where the two Johns examined all the old wood-working tools in sight.

In fact the end-of-season flea-markets have been fun this year. Beneath rain-laden skies above the abbey cloisters at Senones, our next visitors, Viv and Paul scooped up various one euro bargains (fish casserole, apron, serviette holder) before we retired to the village bar for coffee. We also managed a picnic outside the abbey at Moyenmoutier and a short walk before it rained. Viv pointed out the disparity between the small plaque outside the *mairie* to the large number of deportees who never returned at the end of the war, and the considerably larger plaque to the American who set up a canteen for the troops. John and I passed another war-time tribute after we'd enjoyed a flea market at Bertrimoutier and taken a picturesque route back: a ruined farmhouse and memorial in the fields where 52 members of the local resistance were attacked and killed.

Etival-Clairfontaine's first-ever flea market was held around the old abbey church and the surrounding picturesque houses. Above the stalls against the abbey wall we could see some interesting looking stained glass. So afterwards we looked in the church, with its romanesque columns, baroque frontage and modern glass, all reconstructed after the dynamiting of the old church in 1944. And at one of the last flea markets of the year, last Sunday, we made the most of the autumn sunshine, sitting outside one of the barns, eating our chips and surveying the bric-a-brac, antiques, pumpkin displays, and vivid autumn leaves.

Autumn has really arrived now. The trees are beautiful. Lunching this week with Shelagh and Melvin at Senones, the menu included pumpkin soup, venison and apple dessert. And back here, in the evenings, the log stove is lit and we watch the flames ... And that reminds me. Perhaps, now we've brought in the logs from the ill-fated apple tree to dry off, we should ask Mayor Chaxel for a delivery of hardwood logs. Now you couldn't expect the deposed Mayor Pierret to come round delivering from his log-trailer!