

Assumption, roof tiles and quarantine: Everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux, Year 8, Weeks 4 - 14

As we sat on the balcony on Saturday morning with our coffee and croissants, the church bells rang out over the fields. Breakfast-time seemed a bit early for a wedding or a funeral. As there were a couple of flea markets, we showered and drove off to them, without reflecting further on the bells.

We went first to Corcieux, the pleasant town where we'd been camping when we first saw the farmhouse, 19 years ago. This time we parked opposite the café, near the church. People were pouring out of the church. A popular event. Then it dawned that the bells and service, like the flea markets, were in honour of the Feast of the Assumption. So everything apart from cafés and restaurants was closed, while just down the road by the *mairie*, an equally large crowd (more dogs here though) were milling round the flea market stalls.

On the first stall my eye was caught by some big plastic bags of freshly uprooted grape hyacinths. A mere euro for all those tiny bulbs? They looked healthy too, and must like the climate to have been producing such a generous surplus. Our new garden path, which Alistair laid (see below), will look lovely in spring with a border of vivid blue flowers.

The second market was in a small town on the river Vologne. It was a good one, though we left empty handed. We'd parked outside the cemetery, which had a notice about commonwealth war graves. And there under a union jack and a *tricolore*, were a row of graves for the entire crew of a plane shot down by a German fighter in April 1944. Perhaps there should have also been a Canadian and an Australian flag for two of the crew members. So many sad histories all around here.

On our way back we had a look at the old camp-site we'd stayed at the year we bought the farmhouse. We thought we must have taken a wrong turning as it seemed so far out of Corcieux. Did we really make the children walk all that way every day during that very hot summer? Finally we saw a wall with *Camping* still painted on it, and people sitting round the swimming pool. But it was no longer a camp-site, just an ordinary house (with handy a football pitch still in the next field). On the other side of Corcieux one of the other camp-sites now seems to be covered with wooden chalets, which are encroaching on more and more fields. It must have smothered any smaller competition!

Another bit of nostalgic retrospection last week was a trip with Roger and Dorinda to the Blanche Neige restaurant. We hadn't been back since December, as all the friendly waiters were leaving or had already left. The food was as good as ever, as the chef is still there but their standard three-course menu has unfortunately vanished. The new waiters were equally friendly, asking "Is this your first visit?" We reckoned that between us it must be our 21st visit, not to mention John's splendid 60th birthday feast. Another shock was that the coffee machine had changed and they no longer make their tall glasses of layered cappuccino. I wonder what they'll make of our comments form mentioning cheaper menus, cappuccino, and less salt please.

Fortunately, nothing changes at the St Alexis in the woods, not even the menu. We went there again when Ann and Derek were with us, and sat out on the terrace above the vegetable garden. Our waitress was a bit grumpy until the end of her shift when she perked up and told us how much she likes the hours and the drive there. One day she'd seen fifteen deer and another day a wild boar with two babies on her way. The previous time we'd been there with Ann and Derek we'd intended to do some wine tasting afterwards, but felt too replete to bother. So this time we stopped in one of the wine villages, Sigolsheim, before lunch. The co-operative there is very friendly and we all like their wines, so bought some more. While there, I was a bit confused by a note on the counter about the departure in August of the Clarisses. For the asparagus fields belong to a certain Clarisse. But it turned out to refer to the Clarisse nuns whose convent was being disbanded and the nuns dispersed. John read last week about the farewell meal the mayor and village had hosted for the nuns. What a lovely idea! I wonder if the Sigolsheim wine flowed freely or whether it was more sedate. The mayor seemed really sorry to be losing the benign influence of the convent prayers.

We were lucky during Ann and Derek's visit as rain had been forecast for the whole week. But it was fine when we picked them up at Basel airport, so we decided to return along the scenic *Route des Crêtes*. We stopped at a café on the way, and found the wind rather cold and the distant Alps no longer visible. And the skies got darker as we approached the Hohneck. I was keen to stop and look at a monument to the 4th Tunisian *Tirailleurs*, who'd fought a heroic but losing battle up there in the thick snows of December 1944. No snow for us in July, but suddenly the skies opened and the rain sheeted down on this exposed mountainside. I was the only one who was foolish enough to get out of the car for a closer look. However, after that the weather improved, and the day we decided to climb to the top of the Donon and its fake Roman temple, it was really hot (and we didn't even get to the top as lunch at the Belle Vue called).

Our previous visitors had been Sue and Alistair. Alistair had arranged to come out early to work alongside John on a new roof for the workshop. However, with John's Achilles tendons continuing to be a problem, it was a case of Alistair doing all the roofing, with John offering "advice" from the foot of the ladder. But not only did the roof get done (and the golden weather cock settled back on the ridge), but also a new drainage channel, garden path and compost heaps were constructed and dead and diseased trees uprooted and burnt. And all in very hot weather. We must have had at least three large bonfires of debris. But none of them were as spectacular as the *Feux de la Saint Jean* in Saulcy that weekend. At 10pm the small fair was lively, with dodgems, trampoline and roundabout outside the *mairie*, whilst on the football pitch the Saulcy Dauphines were just finishing a twirling routine with illuminated batons. This year's huge log fire had been constructed in the shape of a well, and the firemen climbed up and set fire to the bucket. The fire spread dramatically up the "chain" and along the beam until the whole structure was on fire, lighting up the sky. And all around a magnificent selection of fireworks were whooshing up, exploding and cascading down. Magic!

After all the hard labour, we drove back to Nottingham with Sue and Alistair. Mme Laine usually takes all our post from the postman while we're away, and we usually catch up with the gossip when we collect it on our return. But this time, after spying our car pass, she phoned to say that she had just been down and hung a bag on our door knocker, as she'd heard all about the swine flu in England and didn't want to risk seeing us. Anyone would think there weren't any cases in France. I think we're considered out of quarantine now. But unfortunately I set off again on Friday (for the annual train-gang reunion) so may get quarantined again.