

Stained glass and strikes: Everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux, October–November 2010

The single tower of the cathedral still dominates the skyline of Strasbourg, and any sunny stroll along the canals ends up at the riot of Gothic sculpture round its west doors. As did both sets of our October visitors. Inside, the rich colours of the early stained glass are eye-catching. And the way in which earlier windows have been incorporated into the patchwork of larger, later windows, became a good image of how, reunited with old friends or family, our present was enriched by reminiscences, jokes, and events of the past.

We'd started our day in Strasbourg with Toby and Stella at another large Strasbourg building, sporting the distinctive yellow and blue colours of IKEA. The frequently collapsing back of one of our computer chairs testified to years of service, both with us and in John's former office. So, while Toby and Stella looked round, we tried out the full range of IKEA's computer chairs, each of us fancying different designs. John's high backed choice seemed to be currently available only in scarlet, and my more padded one in a white leatherette reminiscent of a Barbara Cartland poodle and sofa. However when we located the right aisles, John's came in a more sober blue and mine in black (so no inspiration for any historical romances). Satisfied with our purchases, we drove out to a restaurant, with huge glass windows overlooking an ex-gravel pit, which Toby and Stella liked almost as much as their favourite, the Frankenbourg. And it was after lunch that we strolled in the sunshine through the old streets and by the canals to the cathedral. In the late afternoon, a noisy cavalcade of protesters approached over the bridge, many waving scarlet CGT (*Confédération générale du travail*) flags. The procession seemed endless. And still it advanced. As we walked on, the tail of the procession was approaching a bridge further along the canal. All of Alsace seemed to be out protesting against raising the minimum age for taking a pension to an unthinkable 62 (but up to 67 for a full pension if insufficient contributions have been paid). A sense of injustice no doubt also remains that this still would not apply to many government employees, including teachers and SNCF workers, who get better pensions and at a much earlier age.

Two weeks later the Train-gang and partners were due to make their way, by various means, to Entre-deux-Eaux. Once an assorted group of Simon Langton school-girls, reading comics, learning French verbs, doing last minute homework and appraising the Sir Roger Manwood boys on the daily train journeys between Broadstairs and Canterbury, we have, in recent years, met up annually, though never before in France. Of course, the most appropriate way to have come would have been on Eurostar and the TGV, but Easyjet is a lot cheaper. By now, two weeks into the nation-wide pension strikes and blockades of fuel depots, French news stations were reporting dry petrol stations, airport problems, rail problems and youth violence in the usual deprived urban areas. So we all had concerns, Would the Train-gang make it?

First to arrive was Shelagh who'd travelled by camper-van with her husband and dog. They'd filled up with fuel in Luxembourg, so had no problems - until they arrived here, that is, when the van wheels got stuck parking on the field and sank into the mud. Half an hour of frenzied barking, muttered

imprecations, and re-positioning of old bits of wood, brick, plastic ramps and sacking concluded successfully with a small lurch forward onto firmer terrain. Over a reviving drink, we broke the news that Jessica and Mark had also experienced a set-back. Their rucksack containing passports had somehow been left on the luggage rack of the train to Gatwick, and by the time the train had been tracked and the rucksack retrieved, they had missed their plane. The good news was that they were able to re-book on the next morning's flight. Meanwhile Sue, the third gang member, was travelling a longer way round, with her partner and his choir, via Berlin, Dresden and Leipzig and would join us later in the week.

John had been faced with a dilemma. His birthday fell in that week. Would the gang want to celebrate at a restaurant? No problems there (and at least there would be other men). But where? Despite the national shortages, fuel seemed readily available in St Dié (being so close to the border with Germany has its advantages), so we decided to drive over to Epinal and the *Ducs de Lorraine* restaurant. This is in a stylish turn-of-the-century (19th-20th) villa close to the river with very French décor and atmosphere. We were ushered to a circular table next to the window at the panelled end of the dining room. It is always a great relief to find the fastidious Madame absent. She has an irritating way of tweaking the cutlery with reproachful glances at staff. So everyone is far more relaxed on her day off - including the diners! And when the laden dessert trolley arrived, the young waitress was determined we should sample the chefs' full range, cajoling "just one more?"

While we were enjoying the *Ducs'* desserts, the German railway workers were having a day's strike, so Sue, who was the only Train-gang member to travel in appropriate style, was worried that some of her trains from Leipzig might not be running the next day (and we also had concerns about some long-term works-on-the-line which were regularly delaying trains by 10 minutes or more). Any missed connections would mean that she'd have to spend the night in Strasbourg, so we decided to spend the day in Strasbourg and meet her whenever she arrived. So another chance to stroll by the canals, through the narrow shopping streets (Jessica found the most exotic and colourful sock shop - sadly, very pricey), and to visit the cathedral. We paused for lunch at *Porcus*, a small restaurant over a *charcuterie*. Fortified by the day's special of lamb gigot and a glass of wine, we devoted the afternoon to the cathedral windows and the associated Notre Dame museum. We got so absorbed in the Gothic and Romanesque glass and sculpture, that we never reached the paintings at the end and even managed to lose Jessica for twenty minutes in the rambling old buildings. Half way up a magnificent staircase, my mobile rang. Sue's first train had missed the connection by two minutes; the next train was fully booked (perhaps because of the previous day's strike), but she was booked onto the following one, so would arrive two and a half hours late. There was nothing for it but to find a nearby *winstub* and eat and drink the evening away in warm, congenial surroundings!

After all this sitting around eating, a healthy walk was on the menu for the next day, and Jessica, Sue and I headed to the mountain ridge that divides Lorraine from Alsace and that at times divided France from Germany. There were some World War One remains that sounded interesting up at the *Tête des*

Faux. Having explored some of the German intermediate camp below the *Tête des Faux* with the Local History Group, I was keen to walk to the summit from the French side. The plan seemed ill-fated when we reached the *col de Calvaire*, the starting point of a footpath. The sky had been darkening, and heavy rain began to fall, lashing against the car. No-one was keen to get out! A retreat to the lakeside café and mugs of hot chocolate seemed more attractive. After an hour of looking at maps and watching the direction in which low cloud and rain was driving, we decided to try again from this slightly lower, more sheltered point. A good decision, as the weather improved as we walked, and then the most wonderful panorama opened up in front of us in the weak sunshine. As we focussed, we could even make out the snow-capped Alps in the far distance. We paused again when we reached a dark French military cemetery in the woods. A group of horsemen added to the atmosphere as they picked their way down a steep, rocky path towards us, the riders dressed in long dark capes or coats and black brimmed hats. This track, I later read, was made by the French for their mules to supply the garrison at the top. As we scrambled up it we could see craters, zig-zagging trenches, barbed wire, jagged rails, corrugated iron and the collapsed rubble of shelters on either side. At the rocky summit were memorials to the French troops who died there in December 1914 and July 1916. Further along the ridge were more substantial defences, presumably German, some underground, some protected by the slope on the far side. We had to descend again before we could climb up to the end station of the German cableway at the *Roche du Corbeau*, which sounded interesting. However, by the time we'd scrambled down, slowed by patches of icy snow, the sun was getting lower in the sky, and it seemed sensible to turn back. It had been a great walk, and we found that John had been busy experimenting with a recipe from one of his birthday cookery books. We sat down that night to roast pork, chestnut and mushrooms, with asparagus and potatoes - a great finish to the day.

After that burst of energy, we spent the next day in Nancy. We'd planned to focus on the Art Nouveau museum and houses, but in fact spent most of the afternoon sitting in the sunshine at tables outside cafés in the splendid *Place Stanislaus* (what a contrast with yesterday's weather!), walking round the old town, with its elegant squares, small shops and large palace, and pausing to chat with a friendly grocer. We ended up in the big indoor market with its succulent, colourful displays.

On our last day we headed towards the Alsace villages - though we only managed one village, Turckheim, as we spent so long sampling wine in the cave there and then walking round the deserted lunch-time streets. We had a late and very leisurely last lunch together at the *Saint Alexis* in the wooded hills above Kaysersberg. Wild boar was on the menu, there being plenty in the surrounding woods at the moment. Looking back, we seemed to have spent an awful lot of our time together on eating and drinking! Fortunately I only had a few sips of wine on that occasion, as there was a routine police check on the way home and, seeing the Turckheim wine in the boot, the policeman got out his breathalyser kit.

The next day, after breakfast, we waved off the Train-gang. The house seemed very quiet, until we heard shouts and barks getting closer. Standing on the

balcony, we could see the dogs trying to pick up scents on the other bank of the stream. Then suddenly shots, and a young buck came streaking on a swerving course up the side of the orchard and across our road. Happy as we are to eat game, we almost cheered to see him escape safely. A little later we heard that Jessica had a problem at the airport, having absent-mindedly put her bottles of wine in her hand luggage. The security checkers had other ideas and confiscated them. What a sad end to the Train-gang visit.

Since then, November has been very typical. The season for bonfires, composting leaves, making pumpkin soup, stewing apples, rounding up garden furniture, planting bulbs and protecting plants before the first snows. On Armistice Day I strolled down to the war memorial for 11 o'clock, but it was deserted. The Entre-deux-Eaux commemoration had started at 9.45. according to a notice outside the *mairie*. I guess everyone was in the village café by the time the church bells tolled. Later in the month, the cows, which had been grazing on the north field, disconcertingly almost at eye level when we were using our loo, were taken into the big hangar for winter. We also acquired a new satellite box for our television, following the switchover to digital and removal of the small relay transmitter on the hill between us and Mandray. We can now get a bigger range of Francophone channels. It was rather fun to watch Arsenal v Braga on a Mali channel, with analysis from a Mali perspective! Small autumnal pleasures.

And now, on December 1st, it is definitely wintery, with snow falling outside, covering yesterday's many deer and other animal tracks across the white fields. The postman has already brought round his selection of 2011 almanacs. (I chose one with a cover featuring steam engines, hoping it is a promise of interesting journeys in 2011). It feels a good day to start on Christmas cards. One final village update: the village cross which featured on a long-ago Christmas card has, after several missing years, been re-instated at the end of our road with a new wooden cross and its re-polished bronze figure of Christ. But our neighbour Gerard hasn't yet left his bicycle leaning picturesquely against it, as he did on the day of the photograph.

So, swivelling in our new computer chairs (I can't even see John behind the high back of his), looking out over the white tracery of the orchard branches, we send greetings and our recent news before the December rush.