

Le Canicule: everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux, Year 2, weeks 11 - 16

Most of our recently acquired French vocabulary seems to come from DIY emporia (John) and Scrabble sessions (Helen). However “canicule” has come from bitter experience! For anyone who fears that we might have dropped them off our mailing list, or for those who anticipate that we have been off exploring exciting, remote areas, we should explain that our silence has more mundane roots. The first two weeks of August were too scorchingly hot to contemplate any action, and so there was no news. All communication was reduced to the one liner: “nothing to report apart from temperatures of 40 degrees”.

Do not think that we were just being feeble. And yes, we know that you were experiencing record temperatures in the UK, so were suffering too. But you have to add the effects of those first two weeks in August here to those of the preceding two months. Water supplies were already alarmingly low in Entre-deux-Eaux in early June, when the mayor banned watering, filling swimming pools, and washing cars. During July Farmer Duhaut was having to take pumped stream water and supplementary feed to the cows in the fields as the grass was too dry to be nourishing. On the plains of Alsace, the trees were already looking scorched and starting to shed their leaves (in an attempt, an informed friend pointed out, to conserve water). The last forest walk that was bearable was to the attractively named Hunters’ Fountain in the midst of the forest. Sadly the fountain was just dry mud.

Everyone here is used to hot weather in July and August, but drought has not been as severe since the seventies. The problem seems to have been that several months without rainfall followed a winter, in which there was only one significant snow fall (which then froze in -20°C temperatures), producing very little melt when it eventually thawed and ran off the still frozen surface to the rivers, so failing to replenish the underground reservoirs.

So when the August canicule, or searing heat, struck on top of the June and July drought, conditions became extremely difficult. It was too hot for the cows to be kept in the fields and they remained in the cowshed, eating their way through next winter’s feed stocks. In the cool of the evening I took carrot tops up for Mme Laine’s rabbits, and discovered that her sheep were eating small early windfall apples, now that the grass was too parched. So we then wheel-barrowed down some of our windfalls and watched amazed as the sheep bounded like puppies after a stick when Mme Laine threw them an apple each. As the long-term weather forecasts began to predict that the drought could continue until the end of September, our provident farmers Dominique Duhaut and Olivier invested in lorry loads of newly harvested maize (not just the cobs - the whole of sadly shrivelled and dried plants were shredded) from the plains of Alsace, to supplement his own meagre yields for the winter ahead. At least six lorry loads were delivered last week, in lorries so large that branches had to be sawn off one of our tall old apple trees to allow the lorries to pass beneath (a feat which the milk tankers had hitherto performed with ease).

So, given these conditions, it is hardly surprising that we passed those critical two weeks lethargically indoors in the shade of the house or barns. The thick house walls, the old wooden shutters, and the blinds I recently made all helped to shield us from the worst of the heat outside. John used the time to construct a magnificent built-in linen cupboard in the new bathroom. I did enjoy unpacking more cardboard boxes and laying piles of bed-linen, towels, and pillows reverently on the new shelves! It was also an opportunity to paint some of the interior doors (Helen) and complete some door frames (John, using his latest tool, an electric sliding compound mitre saw). And the last purchases of shelving and spice jars have completed the kitchen!

John had also purchased a new motorised satellite dish and digital receiver in an end of July sale. He had managed to set up the ladders against the south facing wall and to fix the new dish. But then the canicule struck; the south facing wall turned into a torture area and the metal ladder was searingly hot. All fine tuning was halted! It was not until August 13th that John returned to the task he'd set himself of linking French TV programmes (which we used to receive only on the TV in the old farmhouse) into the TV in the west wing, and making the new house independent from what visitors were listening to in the old house (we'd been using the digital receiver in the farmhouse and a miniature radio transmitter to provide Radio 4 to radios throughout the building, but with the additional digital receiver the transmitter has now been moved to the west wing).

So thus it was that on August 13th that our own preoccupations with the heat were shattered when we tuned in to French TV news. Pictures flashed up of the Red Cross joining ambulance staff to rush dehydrated and emaciated elderly people to recently opened military hospitals. Care workers were seen trying to persuade bewildered old ladies to drink more – “but I never have a drink in the afternoon!” It was being proposed that undertakers and related professionals should work throughout the public holiday (Assumption) on August 15th and the rest of the weekend to deal with the backlog of bodies.

Everyone here knows that their doctor will be on holiday during August, as French families decant from the town to the coast for the month (a peak time for locum doctors). Like everyone else we had stocked up on routine prescriptions beforehand. But it has been a shock to realise that the emergency planners were also absent. The latest national figure for the number of deaths in excess of the August average is 11,435.

We were just so glad that my mother had returned to Nottingham three days before the temperatures rose. The weather had been hot for much of her stay here, but had not been unbearable. And fortunately our next visitors did not arrive until the temperatures had gone down a bit - at least to UK heat-wave levels!. I think they still found it too hot for much sight-seeing (and probably found us very irritating as we kept saying, “oh it's not nearly as hot as it has been”).

However, despite the heat (albeit reduced!), we have happy memories of a day of panoramas (Bob has a new digital camera), a day of vide-grenier and book village (where Pete spotted some English Pan crime novels from around 1947,

three of which Helen couldn't resist), and John's guided tour of wine villages and Kaiser Wilhelm's restored castle at Haut Koenigsburg (a rare tour, this!). When we were in the village of Freland, the siren went off above the imposing building that looked like the Mairie. Instantly three men rushed out of the restaurant opposite, opened the garage doors, pulled on their sapeurs pompiers uniforms and drove out the first fire engine, shouting directions to men who were arriving by car from more distant houses. High above, in the presumed Mairie, the windows opened and three nuns peered out at the action. I like to think that they were praying for the safety of their brave firemen rather than just gawping like us tourists. Bob helpfully chanted the incantation of names from the start of a long ago children's programme – was it Trumpton?

We spent congenial evenings with our visitors on the balcony as the sun set, Bob identified all the stars and planets above as the wine bottles and dinner plates emptied. The tranquillity was shattered each night around 10 p.m. by shouting and cursing from the fields below, as the improvident farmer attempted to round his cows up in the dark and drive them home along the road by the light of his tractor headlights. We were most amused to watch one evening around 8 p.m. as the cows decided after a long hot afternoon in the fields (they only get taken out around mid-day) that they would go home early. They got themselves onto the road and were processing in an orderly fashion when some kind of bellowed discussion ensued between the cows at the rear and those at the front, which sounded as if it went something like: "But we can't go back before he comes and shouts at us!" "Why not?" "Because he hasn't shouted yet" "But we've had enough!" "Suppose we get lost without him?" "Don't be so stupid! It's the way we always go." "Suppose he's not there?" "We can let ourselves in. We don't need him" "Well I'm going back to the field wait for him". And after some further discussion they all turned round and followed the rear cow back to their field where they waited meekly until the Farmer Vozelle came for them at 10 p.m.

Our farewell meal with Bob and Pete was in a picturesque setting above one of the many canals in Strasbourg. It was Bob and Pete's treat and we'd chosen the Old Customs House, with its traditional (hearty) Alsatian fare. A similar discussion to that of the cows arose around 8.30 p.m. when service had slowed down, due to an influx of customers, and our desserts had not arrived. Bob was anxious to reach the airport by 9 p.m. for the 10.25 p.m. flight (after experiencing the queues at Stansted) whilst we were sure that the Strasbourg Ryanair check-in would be rapid and that we could wait a bit longer! We lingered, had dessert, then walked too fast for comfort to retrieve the car from the car park which we thought might close at 9. With only one other person in the queue, the airport check-in was so rapid that we all had ample time for coffee with in the airport bar. As we waved them off through the gates, we turned our attention to the arrivals gate (Strasbourg airport is not large and

both departures and arrivals are within easy eyeshot of the bar). The plane which would return Pete and Bob to Stansted had brought out Leila.

Leila has been around the world since we last saw her. And not one of her planes, coaches, or trains had been as seriously delayed as her previous flight out to see us at the end of January, when snow fell on the M11 and caused havoc! However this time it had been an easy journey. It was fascinating to hear her traveller's tales of Thailand, Singapore, Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, Chile, Bolivia, and Peru. Sadly their photos weren't printed in time for her to bring them out. So on her last night we ended up watching a selection of our own slides of Peru, taken about three years before Leila's birth, to bring back memories of Cuzco (which she had particularly enjoyed) and the views from Machu Picchu (which had been shrouded in rain clouds when she was there).

In the days between Leila's return to the UK and her visit to us, she had rounded up all her possessions, which had been stored or looked after by various friends in Nottingham, and moved into a new house with two friends. She says it is a great house, just round the corner from her old one (and from her old primary school). Toby had visited on her first weekend back and cooked them all a barbecue. She urgently needed to get a temporary job – anywhere except her last job at Capital One. The latest news flash is that she has obtained the only temping job which would start on September 1st – at Capital One!

On the Sunday of her stay we were joined by friends from Nottingham. They may well be the last of our visitors to arrive via Strasbourg airport, following the French court's decision that the subsidies given by Strasbourg to Ryanair are illegal (damaging to Air France, who had cancelled their Gatwick-Strasbourg service). What is at issue is puzzling as the subsidy probably amounts to no more than £2.50 per Ryanair passenger arriving at or departing from Strasbourg – the last return fare we booked was £21.48 for the Ryanair fares but booking charges and airport and government taxes brought the total to £52.37. From September 24th Ryanair will be flying from Baden-Baden, north east of Strasbourg across the German border, which feels a long way from here, making any round trip likely to be around five hours rather than just over three. We are sad as it was so easy for friends to just “pop over” for a long weekend on a cheap flight.

Wendy and John (S) were brilliantly organised to make the most of their very short break. They took the Sunday early morning flight, hired a car (a Yaris, a friend for Snowy) at the airport, explored a huge vide-grenier near Strasbourg, then drove a very scenic route via Mont Sainte Odile to meet us at the Belle Vue restaurant (one of our favourites). They feel that French Sunday lunch should be the focus of any trip, however short, to France. Such wisdom! We sat out on the wooden terrace under huge shady trees and white umbrellas, mentally savouring all the dishes on the varied menu. The selection made and appetisers brought, the four-course lunch was delightfully leisurely, with no time pressures (as there had been at the Old Customs House). Next to us a large birthday party, with children at one large table, and the birthday grandfather and other adults at another, were enjoying an equally leisurely meal (such impeccable table manners French children have, no whining about

food, just sheer family celebration). Our coffee at the end of the meal arrived in two cups, with an explanation of the two different coffee beans used, and a glass of refreshing kiwi juice. After such a meal, we abandoned all thoughts of a nearby museum or even jazz under the Tower of Liberty in St Dié, and we drove home for Wendy and John (S) to unwind from their few hours sleep the previous night followed by the journeys and ample lunch. However we soon rallied for an evening stroll through the woods and fields around the farmhouse, and even worked up enough appetite for a late supper on the balcony.

In the three days that followed, Wendy and John (S) continued to combine leisurely meals with plenty of action. In the early nineties, when we'd only recently started to decorate and furnish the farmhouse, and when all our children were still at school, they'd spent several half-term holidays skiing here with friends. So they were now interested to see the landscape without snow. I was a bit of a wet blanket about walking up to the hitherto (for them) snow-capped summits of the Schlucht and Hohnneck. The lands at the top of the ski lifts were the old summer grazing pastures, and, as they are well above the tree line, we felt that they'd be too parched and exposed for walking under the (still) hot sun. John (B) therefore proposed a walk from the glacial Lac Blanc, which ascended steeply through the forest, emerged onto the pasture, then descended again through forests. He and Leila then sat back whilst Wendy, John (S) and I set out on this spectacular route. We climbed up past petrified youngsters abseiling on one of the pinnacles high above the lake, up past the source of one of the rivers, until we came out at what felt like a huge mountain cross roads; from every direction people were toiling across the golden grazing grass. The national footpath (Grande Route) 5 follows the mountain ridge with its spectacular views for many miles, intersected by lesser tracks. A light breeze blew across the ridge and made it pleasant to linger and admire the panoramas, before descending to an auberge for a light lunch. With the maps spread out, we decided to complete the walk along the lake shore, then drive along the mountain ridge to an alpine garden. Despite the drought, the garden was interesting - we identified various plants we'd seen earlier, as we wandered between the Vosges, the Himalayas, and Japan (the different sections of the garden). Then to finish off, we drove down to the lake at Gérardmer to look at wind-surfing options. Of course, by the time we returned, John (B) had produced one of his great meals to round off the day.

Wind-surfing was judged impractical the following day, due to lack of wind, and Wendy and John (S) bravely set out eastwards for Le Struthof, the only concentration camp which the Germans built on French soil (well, they did consider Alsace to have really been German all along). More peaceful stopping-off points en route were the lake at Pierre Percée and the old cobbled Roman road above. The following day they explored westwards the faded glories of Rambervillers (crumbling art nouveau windows, balconies and doorways, and fading lettering of old shops - not to mention the inimitable and still current sign over a shop selling both guns and sewing machines). Then Epinal in the heat. Sadly, after an early dinner here, it was time for them to set off, taking Leila with them, for the evening flight to Stansted. We were rather overwhelmed when they presented us with local Pinot Noir wine and the new

Larousse cyclopaedia – but not too overwhelmed to have enjoyed drinking and browsing since.

Perhaps it was just as well that they left in the heat on Wednesday and had an uneventful journey back. For on Thursday the skies darkened, there were radio warnings of high winds, storms, and hail (I think snow was the only weather not to be mentioned. However we were urged to remove all pot plants from balconies). When the clouds opened that evening, it was marvellous, if you were indoors, to hear the rain drumming down and to imagine it soaking into the parched earth and fields. Not so marvellous if, like our friend Nicola, you were driving on motorways on the heights above Verdun, where it became almost impossible to see the road ahead. On the following day, the land looked refreshed and the sun was shining. I therefore decided to go on the Friday walk, after several weeks absence. We were nearly at our starting point, the former small silver mining community of Le Chipal, when the skies turned rapidly black and sheets of white rain lashed the coach, which slowed almost to a halt. “Anyone want to come back to St Dié with me?” joked the driver as he dropped us off outside the old miners’ chapel. None of the hardy walkers even considered his offer, though it was good to take shelter in the old chapel and listen to a bit of the history of the community (a lot of Austrian and Swiss miners had settled there in centuries past), before plodding uphill through the diminishing rain to the mine du Noir Bois.

Since the rain, the temperatures have continued to drop, and we’ve had to rummage for long buried socks and pullovers. The underground cisterns have filled up again, and the nightly pumping for plant watering has ceased, though we’re still collecting our soapy shower and washing-up water (after all, one storm doesn’t end a drought). The meadows are turning green, the cows are out grazing again, and Dominique and Olivier have put electric fencing round one of our fields. So once more we should hear the sound of the cows’ steady chewing outside. However, it will be a long time before anyone here forgets la canicule of August 2003.

The 2004 Larousse has proved formidable. So here, to conclude, is its definition of:

CANICULE n.f. (lat. *Canicula*, petite chienne, nom donné à l’étoile Sirius). **1.** Période de très grande chaleur de l’été; cette chaleur elle-même. **2.** ASTRON. Époque où l’étoile Sirius se lève et se couche avec le Soleil, et qui marquait, jadis, le début de l’été (à la latitude du Caire)

Now, did Bob point out Sirius – or were we at the wrong latitude at the wrong time?