

Year 2 Weeks 3 to 5

The sacred, the school-house, and the staircase: Everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux

It isn't just the occasional strikes (teachers and public servants) and the holiday-makers (Dutch caravans are on the move in the sunshine) which currently make the villages and towns seem full of idle people. It's also the great public holidays of Ascension Day and Pentecost which have added to the bustle and festivity.

Ascension Day, a Thursday, hummed with the sound of the baler on the huge field immediately to the north of us and another to the south of the road in to Entre Deux Eaux. Farmer Dominique Duhaut and his farming partner Olivier had cut their hay a few days earlier, and our neighbour Pierre Laine had been roped in to help them turn it daily. But with storms forecast for the day after Ascension Day, it was all hands to the tractors to bale the hay and encase it in plastic (white this year, followed, when the white ran out, by a tasteful shade of pale green). However, they and the patisserie shops were the only people working flat out on this public holiday. In Nottingham it was tough luck if your rubbish collection day fell on a public holiday. So on Ascension Day we weren't quite sure when our bins (including that of our departed visitors) would eventually be emptied. Our plastic bags used to be collected by the commune employee on his tractor and trailer, but we now have a commercial firm, who prefer real dustbins (on a canoeing trip a few years ago John and Alistair fished our wheelie bin out of a Staffordshire canal, cleaned off the slime, and we used it as a large suitcase in our next car trip out here!). I was amazed when I looked out of the bathroom window at 11.20 p.m. the following evening to realise that the noise I'd heard was created by the dustmen. They waved cheerfully. (I now have my answer to John's question "But why do you want a bathroom blind - who can possibly see in apart from the cows in the field?".)

Six villages (but not Entre-deux-Eaux) took part in the local Semaine d'Art. Since it started on Ascension Day (Thursday) and finished on Sunday, it was a rather short four day "week"! One of its aims was to involve the public in the work of local artists, as well as to award a jury prize to the best artist. So the public was invited to tour all six exhibitions and to vote for their favourite at each venue. The storm, which the farmers had been so anxious to avoid, broke forcefully on the Friday as we set out on our tour. We started at Mandray, where, I confess, we were more interested in the conversion work on the old industrial building rather than the lurid oil paintings on the top floor by the Mandray Art Group. The building was deserted apart from us, though just as we were leaving, someone came rushing in saying that we were her first visitors. As she wasn't sure about the voting system, we had a good excuse for not having to pick out an imitation Picasso or some corrugated paper and oil paint sky-scrapers. We drove through dramatic thunder and rain over the Col de Mandray (with its own sculptures on storm-devastated trees) down to Fraize. Fraize is bigger and grander and they had set a theme for their exhibition - "The sacred". I think the theme had constrained a lot of exhibitors, who felt they ought to imitate the great masters, with sombre last

suppers and crucifixions. Tucked away in one corner were some small pen and ink sketches of nuns travelling across the Vosgian countryside – including one on a bicycle, two in a fast sleek car and my favourite, a nun on a tractor. The artist had my vote, and, it appears, the vote of a lot of other people, as he won the “popular” prize when visitors’ votes were added up. We went on to Plainfaing (where they’d craftily added an exhibition of enlarged old postcards of Plainfaing at the beginning of the century. This was attracting a lot more interest!), then Clefcy, then Anould and finally St Leonard. Our friend Nicola had six paintings on display at Clefcy (her Vosgian scenes are always popular with voters). As I took my voting very seriously, I was delighted to hear later that my name had been drawn out of the hat, along with nine others, for a little present. So the following Wednesday evening John and I took our places round the table at Clefcy for the presentation of artists’ prizes and voters’ presents. We are now the possessors of a set of Chardin prints. (The table was for the fizzy wine, orange juice and nibbles which followed the speeches and photographs).

On our travels between the six art venues, we had stopped off at a small staircase showroom to enquire the prices of their staircases. By now you can probably guess the response – they couldn’t possibly give us any idea of cost, let alone a ball-park figure, without coming out to us and measuring up – it had to be their own measurements, John’s wouldn’t possibly do. So we duly received a phone call from their sales-woman / measurer and arranged a rendez-vous. In case you haven’t seen our barn conversion, I should explain that you enter the middle barn and go up some still-bare concrete stairs, without handrail, to the first floor (which used to be the hay loft). The first floor, which now contains a large sitting room, kitchen, bathroom and two bedrooms, extends over all three barns. In the ceiling is a large square hole where we want to install a staircase up to the roof space, where we will have a spacious office-cum-bedroom. Now I would have thought that most people who wanted a new staircase did so because they didn’t already have a staircase. It’s not one of those items that you wake up one day and fancy a change. So when I answered the doorbell, I was dismayed to see a little old lady (elegant, but drooping in the heat). She must have been in her seventies, could hardly carry her briefcases and handbag, and had great difficulty getting up our steps. It took her about five minutes to recover and extract her tape measure, but there was no way that she was going to be able to scramble up the temporary ladder and take the required dimensions of the hole. So she stood at the bottom with her ruler and notepad, whilst John took the measurements (which he knew already) for her. She hadn’t brought all the “catalogues” we’d been promised (I expect they were too heavy), so there were only a couple of photograph albums to choose from and two or three wood samples. It will take her fifteen days to work out the price for the three styles we chose just to get an idea of possible costs. But we’re not holding our breath. I felt very sorry for the poor old lady and couldn’t imagine she would sell many staircases; John wondered whether it was the only way the owners could get an interfering mother or mother-in-law out of the way for part of the day!

A more successful rendez-vous had been arranged earlier to view the old school-house in Rememont. Sadly, many of the old village schools have closed

down. The one in Entre-deux-Eaux (where our mayor is currently having his office and occasional salle des mariages renovated), closed about ten years ago, but the one up the hill at Rememont closed about twenty years ago and was finally sold to some Parisians about eight years ago. Until the great storm, it stood in dark forest on hillside, on a rather isolated stretch of road. But now the trees are all cleared, it is in a light and airy position. The Parisians replaced the roof, installed heating and electricity but then were rarely seen apart from a week or so in August. As you know, we both love looking round (and even, occasionally, buying) old houses. We'd promised to keep our eyes open for the Rowes, who'd decided that the "wet-house" would not readily turn into their dream house. On visiting the notaire's office we'd realised that the schoolhouse was not only too large, but too lacking in interior décor for the Rowes (all this was verbal as there was no printed description despite the property having been advertised). However, Ann and Michael (Nicola's dog-sitters) are inveterate house hunters (though, on balance, I think they'd prefer Hay-on-Wye to Entre-deux-Eaux).

So on the same hot day that the staircase saleswoman tottered up our stairs, we, an hour later, stood on the steps of the old school house in front of the big door. Inside was a small stone-floored lobby with the children's coat hooks still on the wall! A door led into the huge single class-room, which occupied the whole ground floor. As the agent flung open the long windows, the sun streamed in from the south onto two black boards. The old stove had vanished, but the chimney was still in place. A small modern toilet had been installed in the lobby (but I suspect an outside building would have served the schoolchildren). Stone stairs led down to large cellars (with well) and up to the school-teacher's apartment (a kitchen and three interconnected rooms off which a modern bathroom had been installed). Up again to the attic, a splendid large space, with the rope hanging down from the bell tower (a condition of the original sale by the commune, which would apply to any subsequent sale, was that the bell and its tower should be maintained). Ann sat on the steps, looking so at home there, whilst John and Michael paced out the strip of land and we all peered into the old wash-house.

"There are no bad ghosts in this building" said Ann, very seriously. And in fact you could imagine the happy sound of children's voices in the afternoon sunshine (it was end-of-afternoon-school-time). I remembered an article I'd read in the library. The author (a respected local historian) started by recalling his schooldays between the wars at Rememont school, when he and his friends would often see a mysterious lady in black standing near the stone cross at the top of the hill. It was one of the ridges where many men had been wiped out in assault at the start of the first world war. The author had always been curious about the old lady in black, so had recently researched the names of those killed, one of whom sounded like a Spanish aristocrat. He discovered that the aristocrat had in fact been fighting for the German army not the French army when killed on the Rememont ridge all those years ago.

Incidentally, John discovered another interesting fact about the same spot. Beneath a cherry tree there is a small memorial, with a distinctive cross of Lorraine, to two resistance fighters from the Second World War. The unusual surname, Florendidier, of one of the young men who were hanged by the Germans from the cherry tree, is that of our assistant-kitchen-tile salesman,

who is currently building a house on a plot of family land there. One of these days we must ask him about his ancestor.

Last time we went into the builders' merchant, young Florendidier gave us a fulsome welcome, and told us that our tiles had arrived (we'd thought they might phone and let us know). So once our faulty kitchen units have been replaced (the installer returned with a new unit, but, on un-packing it, discovered it to be scratched, so left again!) John will be able to progress with tiling and shelving the upper half of the kitchen. John is currently hard at work back in the old house, insulating the outer walls of the dining room. We had a small space in the car on our recent return from the UK, and filled it with bright shades of paint for the old house! So soon the dining room will change from a cold beige to a warm yellow colour.

At the weekend, we bought a very unusual little cast metal plaque dated 1976 from one of the flea markets. It shows a man and a woman with two cows and is very stylish, reminding me of some book illustrations of the 30s and 40s. Following up the "Hanna Cauer fecit" stamp on the back, John discovered that she was a sculptor (1902-89) from a family of artists, but the only internet information was unfortunately in German and not very detailed (and the computer-translator produced an almost incomprehensible "English" text). The plaque would look good in various places, one possibility being to incorporate it in the kitchen tiling.

The Sunday flea markets are well under way now. One of the most successful was our very own one of Entre-deux-Eaux. It is in fact held some way from the centre of the village, in Rememont, below the school-house, on the commune's football pitch. As Nicola was still in the States at the time, we felt that we should buy her something from there for her birthday. We spotted a furry battery-operated creature reclining on a pillow that gives a little sigh then starts gently snoring (sound and touch activated). So we got her that (revenge for the hideous green plastic frog she gave us that croaks in the lavender bushes every time I pass). We almost exhausted the battery playing with it ourselves, as it was so delightful!

On the Sunday of Pentecost there were less markets than usual, but we set off for a small village some way from us, to the south east of Nancy. As we drove through small villages we saw all the white-robed children coming out of the churches. As we approached Sommerviller there were no other cars to be seen, and the village seemed deserted. However, when we reached the church at the T-junction, there was the longest village flea market we'd ever seen! The following day was a bank holiday for Pentecost and there were more markets. We decided to go in the opposite direction, over the hills into one of the wine-producing villages of Alsace - Ammerschwir. This was a particularly successful expedition, as, not only did we buy the metal plaque described above, but also a little blue vase, a print of Strasbourg, a white jug hand-painted with cowslips (very appropriate for here!), and four heavy metal individual rum-baba/savarin rings.

The only thing I didn't find in any of the flea markets was an old hoe. Mme Laine always inspects our garden when she passes. One morning when she was en route to collect some cow manure for her roses (from nephew

Dominique's cowshed), she pronounced that I had the wrong kind of hoe for earthing up potatoes. Ten minutes later she was back with her hoe and demonstrating its superiority. In no time at all she had earthed up the first row for me. I wondered if she'd do it all if I was sufficiently admiring! Sadly she didn't, but lent me her hoe for 24 hours. As it was already far too hot to stay outdoors (and it was breakfast time), I got up at 6 the next morning to exploit the perfect hoe,

John's earliest start to the day was on 31 May. He got up noiselessly in the hope the clouds would be clear in time for the eclipse (partial here), unlike our abortive total eclipse exploits a few years ago. It was very misty in the valley here in the morning; there had been a thunderstorm the previous night and afterwards the mist rolled down into the valley. In the end he drove up to Saales but it wasn't really far enough as the mountains were still obscuring the rising sun. When the sun finally came over the horizon there was just about a third bite out of the left side. He said afterwards he should really have driven past Schirmeck when he would really have been into the Rhine valley, but by then it was too late. The sun was still hazy and not very bright so the old eclipse glasses were too opaque to see anything; the haze did provide enough filtration for the odd glance.

The post-Pentecost entertainment in the tremendous heat (38 degrees for much of the day) has been watching from our balcony or French windows as Farmer Duhaut's work partner, Olivier, has cut the hay in the fields to the west and south. They have some reciprocal arrangement with the Laines, whereby they get the hay off one of our fields. So in the post-mid-day heat M. Laine turned up on his ancient baler. I've never seen him in a straw hat before, but the heat was intense – he looked most picturesque. Mme Laine looked even more so when she arrived in an old blue dress and straw hat like a lamp shade, wielding a large wooden rake. Their baler makes much smaller, rectangular bales than Dominique and Olivier's huge round bales. Unfortunately the baler wasn't working properly and it was Mme Laine who was energetically removing the un-baled hay from the baler and raking it into fresh heaps, which the old baler once more declined to bale. Not surprisingly, she got very angry when she saw me taking a photograph – “c'est pas amusant”, she shouted.

As soon as the fields were clear, the first hot air balloon of the year was seen passing high over head. Presumably they're banned from landing whilst the grass is lush and long. Today, an exhibition opens in the neighbouring village of Saulcy-sur-Meurthe, in honour of France's famous world war one ace, René Fonck. The road through Saulcy was blocked mid-morning as John went to the bricolage and there was a ceremony at the local war memorial. Later in the morning we could see two old planes flying over Saulcy.

As the heat has continued, the mayor has come round delivering a hand-written, photocopied edict about the shortage of water. The village reservoirs are running short and those in the neighbouring village of Mandray have become too low to continue to supply Entre-deux-Eaux needs. So all watering of gardens, washing of cars and, of course, filling of swimming pools is forbidden – on pain of cutting off supplies. So it was out with the buckets in

the shower and kitchen (and even outside when a short sharp storm broke this morning and the gutters were overflowing for 10 minutes).

Sweltering greetings from Entre-deux-Eaux!