

Year 2, weeks 44-49

Doctors, Monkeys, and Tax; the approach of Spring in Entre-deux-Eaux

“Spring was moving in the air above and in the earth below and around him, penetrating even his dark and lowly little house with its spirit of divine discontent and longing”. Mole responded to the wondrous spring sunshine by rushing off to discover the river bank and the pleasures of messing around in boats. After the dullness and isolation of winter, the villagers of Entre-deux-Eaux respond more like toad than mole or rat. The revving of engines is heard, and out come the tractors, diggers, and lorries.

Farmer Dominique Duhaut delivers a load of manure we requested at the end of last year. Just below our balcony (and so aromatic). He also sprays the surrounding fields thoroughly. Later two tractors (at front and rear) edge an enormous metal drum up the lane towards his cow shed, doing battle with the branches of one of our apple trees as they pass. His cousin Alain Duhaut, the commune employee, starts digging trenches for a large pipe to St Léonard so that, following careful deliberations and negotiations, our commune can import water, in times of need, from the neighbouring commune of St Léonard (arrangements with neighbouring Mandray having broken down during last summer's drought as they too ran short of water). Our builder, Jose de Freitas, decides to extend his unsightly builder's yard still further and bulldozes some more earth to form a platform for heaps of pipes and timber. Neighbour Pierre Laine, who had a hip replacement in January, is forced out of doors for a daily constitutional by his wife (but he always seems to be proceeding to or from the bar!). However one day he stops to inspect and advise on the new potato plot I'm digging and pronounces the manure ready for use. A German “week-ender” also stops and offers advice on the manure heap – cover and leave for two years. We ignore this, as the goodness is intended to enrich this year's potato patch (next year's flower garden). A slow chugging up the lane is next door's sit-on lawn mower, driven by their five-year old daughter (fortunately sitting on her father's lap). Helen eyes the contraption with envy, having been struggling to mow our meadow grass with a Flymo! And today the cows are finally out on one of the nearby fields. Jonquils have come and gone and now we have cowslips in our fields. Spring has arrived in Entre-deux-Eaux!

Into all this rural activity came one of those phone calls you always dread: Helen's mother had been taken to the City Hospital in Nottingham following a fall. She had been recovering well (from her Christmas illness), and was even talking of coming out to Entre-deux-Eaux as usual in June and July. Leila is doing a sterling job of visiting her and Helen now has a couple of trips back booked (so this newsletter is a rather hasty update).

It was fortunate that Leila had returned three days previously to Nottingham. She and her friend Natalie had been spending a week partly with us in Entre-deux-Eaux and partly at Nicola's doing a few days dog-sitting. In between dog-walking there and meals with us, Leila was very good at showing Natalie some of the sights of Alsace, like Kaiser Wilhelm's reconstructed Haut Koenigsberg castle, the wine village of Riquewihr and le Struthof Natzwiller concentration camp. But the highlight for them was incontestably Monkey Mountain. This is a wooded area below Haut Koenigsberg castle which is sufficiently similar to the Atlas Mountains for a reintroduction scheme of *magots* (Barbary

macaques) to have been set up. There seems to be less emphasis nowadays on their re-introduction to Morocco and more on their Alsace tourist attraction potential. But as well as all the macaques waiting by the tracks to nibble popcorn (issued at the ticket office) from your hand, there is a battalion of strolling educators who tell you about individual animals, the dominance patterns within groups, and the latest births. The girls were much amused by the impudent male who watched a German visitor clutching her popcorn rations to her bosom; he then marched up, nudged one of her hands and definitely smirked as the visitor shrieked, dropped all her popcorn at his feet, and headed for the exit.

The flea market season also opened while Leila and Natalie were with us. Last year it had been gloriously sunny for neighbouring Mandray's vide-grenier. Last year we'd parked outside an attractive looking old farmhouse which was empty and for sale. This year we parked outside again, having recently become acquainted with its new inhabitants - a retired English couple and their cat; so we now know of three Anglo-Saxon households in the region! As the rain got steadier and threatened to wash-out the stalls, we retreated to the warmth of their house for coffee and admired the renovations from inside! It was amusing hearing their account of redecorating the kitchen (the new paint pulled off all the old plaster) and of rushing to decorate the visitors' room before the first visitors. It was all so familiar! Despite all the work they are doing on the house, they have the newcomers' zeal for exploration and seem to have been everywhere in the last 5 weeks! Last night we joined them for a meal at a ferme-auberge perched on the hills above Plainfaing before their retreat to London for a month or so.

We've often commented on how well-behaved French children are in restaurants. Soon after we were seated in the wooden-beamed farm dining room, a party of thirteen trooped in. The children were reasonably behaved, but their attached adults must have had a few celebratory aperitifs en route. There was much miming of bumping heads on beams, taking of photographs, and deafening donkey impersonations. The food was good, but coming out into the stillness of the starlit night, it seemed so peaceful to just stand looking out across the valley with the lights of the houses far below. (We did hope the donkey impersonator wouldn't be the driver on the winding track down the hill).

If you're bored by the unfolding saga of our explorations of the intricacies of the French health service, you should ignore the next couple of paragraphs. But every time we are notified of our Social Security (equivalent) partial reimbursements of money spent on doctors' visits and prescriptions, we also get a form inviting us to a free health check up. So one grey winter day when not much else was happening, we filled in our form. They must have been very short of participants as we soon had a phone call inviting us to attend in Nancy - they could fit us in much sooner than we could fit them in (after all there were imminent trips to Morocco and to Nottingham). The range of checks was impressive, with urine, blood, faeces (not so pleasant), eyes, ears, height, weight, blood pressure and heart all being scrutinised. There was a slight mis-understanding over the blood taking, as we had been instructed not have anything to eat in the morning - just a drink. They hadn't allowed for the English habit of adding milk to their tea - which might have accounted for John's abnormal blood fat readings! Within a couple of weeks we got a full set

of results, with instructions that our doctor had also received a copy and would follow up on them. We also discovered the existence of and acquired booklets in which doctors can note consultations and record vaccinations.

Our pleasant doctor seemed less than enthusiastic as he ushered us into his *cabinet*. There were rather a lot of recommendations to check, his lunch-time was fast approaching, he'd had genuinely ill-looking and sounding patients before us, and we discovered he couldn't extract his usual 20 euro fee for this free follow-up consultation. He hesitated when Helen commented on what a splendid service it was, and when pressed implied that it was little more than a regional statistics-collecting body that was nowhere near as thorough and informed as a patient's own doctor, and anyway it didn't reach the kind of people who never went to their own doctor (or couldn't afford to?). He was completely unimpressed by the various recommendations, though did write prescriptions for our overdue tetanus and polio vaccines and ordered some re-tests with local specialists, just to prove that there was really nothing to be concerned about. It was hard to tell whether he acted on the principle that if it doesn't hurt you yet there's nothing wrong or whether we are in danger, as we feared earlier, of rapidly becoming *malades imaginaires*.

Whilst on the subject of cracking French systems, with 2003 having been our first full year in France, the long-dreaded time had finally come for us to get acquainted with the French income tax system. The first reaction of the St Dié tax office advisor was that it would be much simpler if we just went away again and declared everything in England. So if you share his reaction to tax matters, you'd better skip another four paragraphs!

The French tax year is the calendar year and tax is retrospective. Forms have to be in by the end of March with final assessments being sent out in mid-August (a happy welcome home for all those who've just spent the month away on holiday)! The bill has to be paid in September; there is no pay-as-you-earn in France. As we weren't in the system we didn't get sent any forms automatically, so John downloaded copies from the Internet.

The basic tax form is simple compared to a UK form. Two pages are mainly devoted to who you are, where you live, whether you are married, and whether you have dependants at home. The third page has about 30 lines where the totals of different sorts of income are declared, and the last page is mainly for claimable expenses. The French are taxed as a household with the total income declared on a single form; that is then divided by the number of "family" parts (one part if you are single, two parts if you are a couple, and an additional half-part for each dependant) with the resulting figure being the taxable income rather than there being a system of allowances.

The way all income is declared is very different from the UK system, so we couldn't make any assumptions as to what went where (there is no direct equivalent of private pension). So first we had to peruse our equivalent to the Which! Tax Guide (the *Le Particulier Guide*, which runs to over 300 pages of financial information with many references to the appropriate tax case law!) and decide in which sections we ought to declare our income. As it finally turned out, we had less than ten lines of income totals to fill in; but then, because of our foreign (UK) taxed income, we had to complete an additional, more explanatory, form with net and gross figures. With draft forms

completed, we proceeded to the local tax office and the aforementioned advisor. He was a bit bemused by the foreign income form and called in a supervisor; she seemed equally bemused and soon left, implying it looked OK. So the tax officer filled in final copies of the forms, making a few errors in transcription (which John corrected) for us to sign. Finally he entered everything into his computer to give us a rough calculation of our likely tax bill and the separate social fund payments. In the end, completing the form was less daunting than we thought it was going to be, but then our income and allowances are less complicated than they were when we were working in the UK. And just about no supplementary information was required – but then presumably without PAYE every household in France has to complete a tax form, whereas in the UK that isn't the case.

But after all that, the tax official couldn't give us what we really wanted – a French Tax Number. We need one to prove to the Inland Revenue we're now paying tax in France and to allow us to receive various UK income tax-free; that will have to wait until the official assessment arrives in August. So it could take us another year or so to get everything properly sorted out!

Reverting to the health theme, the Sainte Marguerite pensioners continue to keep fit on Thursday mornings. However, recently both the usual instructor and also her usual replacement were on holiday. Nothing daunted, two of the male committee members volunteered to take over. Although they had been left a programme of gentle exercises, they hadn't quite worked out the accompanying music and decided that the theme tune from "Chariots of Fire" would suit everything. They also decided to up the pace a bit. Perhaps they were nostalgic for their military service days. At any rate, they commenced with quick galloping. As they changed from forwards to sideways galloping, three elderly ladies fell over. Not a good start. We then raced through all the exercises (with the leadership switching as one of the men dashed to the loo from time to time), ignoring the languorous pace of the music. We completed the exercises with half an hour left. One of the men remembered press-ups and demonstrated them. Only one of his audience tried that. The rest practised much needed deep breathing instead. But we gave our "instructors" a good clap at the end.

After much cogitation, we've finally ordered a friend for Snowy (the Yaris) – though not, as it turns out, Tintin. John favours Bluto, Popeye's sparring partner (and Olive Oyl's charmer), which will give you an idea of the colour and make, and hint of the size! Helen likes the more nautical Captain Haddock (retaining the Tintin theme). All suggestions of a mid-blue nature welcome!

And finally, back to the soil. The spring sunshine also induced a fit of outdoor spring cleaning. A Romany scrap metal dealer had offered to remove all the old metal heaped up outside (guttering, rails, corrugated iron that could come in useful one of these days). However, as he never came back, we decided he'd really been after the old ploughs. So John set to and cleared the area. The ploughs have been incorporated into our very own piece of modern sculpture on the edge of the orchard (other components being a sink and an old boiler). We now have a new heap of old metal by the roadside (to rival builder de Freitas' eyesore), a car-standing space (probably eventually to become a garage), and a pretty view of the future garden (not to mention the orchard sculpture). Sadly, rain has now stopped work! Is Spring over?