

Year 2 Weeks 6 to 10

Drought, destruction, and liberty: Everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux

As I start this newsletter, thunder is rolling round the valley. I am torn between longing for rain now for the parched fields and gardens, and hoping that the storm will pass before John's Ryanair flight back from Stansted tonight (following a short pre-birthday visit to his mother).

The mayor had just delivered his ban on using the commune's rapidly dwindling water supply for gardens, cars, and swimming pools when we last wrote. So since then the value of the old ways has been fully demonstrated. Most of the old farmhouses still have their alternatives to tap water. We, for example, have two underground tanks beneath the first and third barns, filled from the roof down-pipes, which would have been used for the animals. Other old houses have stone troughs alongside the road filled from underground sources (even before the drought one old lady regularly filled her buckets and did her washing at her trough). Monsieur Laine in his more modern house has in the past weeks enlarged his water hole filled by a muddy hillside stream, and now pumps water from it for their garden and animals. So our evening ritual now includes pumping water from one of our underground cisterns into buckets and cans to water the vegetables as the sun sets. All visitors, including my 92-year old mother, have been roped in to help at various times.

Leisure activities in the Vosges department have also been affected. At the beginning of July a departmental edict prohibited fishing and swimming in three-quarters of the rivers and streams of the Vosges (salmon streams). Oddly enough canoeing and kayaking is not affected. Nor is economic and agricultural activity. The huge wood-yard piles of tree trunks, which fell or were felled following the tempest of December 1999, continue to be sprayed night and day by water jets, being kept damp and awaiting sawmill capacity. And watering of the corn fields is still permitted, as is fishing and bathing in the glacial lakes and reservoirs.

When we first came here, twelve years ago, Barlier, the retired policeman next door, possessed a large pond fed by the tiny stream which flows past M. Laine. It was very picturesque, lined with railway sleepers and surrounded by shady trees. We once wondered whether it was one of the two waters of the village's name. After Barlier's death, the new occupants cut down the trees, diverted the water straight to the stream below, and allowed the pond to silt up. According to Mme Laine, they have tried to get permission for the land to be used for yet another chalet. Permission was recently refused, and a couple of weeks ago an excavator arrived and dug out all the silt, followed by a goodly depth of the heavy clay soil beneath. This created a huge, empty, unshaded pond.

Two days later, the sky became leaden and we watched dark storm clouds approaching from the west. At least, it was generally from the west; the gleaming copper cock on our new weather vane was whirling madly in circles as the wind gusted and swirled. Suddenly the rain arrived. But it wasn't rain. Out of the sky fell diagonal lines of hail, each piece the size of an old penny.

As they sliced against the velux windows, we feared the glass would shatter. We watched as the vegetables were scythed, as the road and fields turned white and as fallen hailstones banked up against the terrace fence. When it finally stopped, the potatoes were flattened, the young lettuces mashed into the earth, the bay tree and hydrangea leaves were riddled with large holes, and damson tree leaves covered the roads. John pointed to the shutters, - the very ones I had lovingly repainted blue last autumn. Flakes of blue had been chipped off by the hail stones.

We were fortunate, as our vegetable garden was protected from the onslaught by being in the shadow of the east end the house. Mme Laine was so distraught as she surveyed her garden, which lies to the south of their house, in the path of the storm, and also their potato field to the west, that her head started to throb and she wept and took to her bed. All the early tomatoes which she'd been protecting with plastic umbrellas from earlier night frosts and which had been ripening provocatively in the sun, were pitted to the point of being inedible. We watched as a neighbouring fire engine came racing along the road into Entre-deux-Eaux, flashing its blue lights. Later the shop-keeper explained that one of her neighbours in the hillside houses had summoned the sapeurs pompiers as their cellar started to fill rapidly. (The shopkeeper herself had been quite happy to acquire and use a cellarful of water!)

The plus side for most of us was that our underground tanks, our troughs, and our muddy holes filled up, - as next door's new pond partially did. (When the pool is full and all bans removed, will next door sell his pond water to the commune, landscape a swimming pool, or hold fishing parties, we wonder). It was almost miraculous how many of the battered plants survived being pounded into the earth, and stood proud after a few days. But, despite the intensity of the hail, the dampness was superficial. The drought continues, as does the pumping of garden water.

As with all crises, the hail damage provided plenty to discuss with other villagers! My mother had intrepidly taken a flight out from Birmingham three weeks ago, and last weekend Ann (Hart) flew out for a long weekend. My stroll down to the village shop with Ann and my mother for the Saturday paper that weekend was therefore quite a sociable event. My mother enjoys these wheelchair processions! Having chatted in the shop about floods and fireworks, we ended up sitting on the bench beneath the old tree, opposite the war memorial, below the church.

Straight away the former shopkeeper's wife popped out of their little house opposite the church. Then she introduced us to a lady hobbling past carrying a small plastic watering can (in case the tap in the churchyard had dried up). We sat and gossiped under the tree about the storm and village life. Then there was a distant shout as Farmer Vozelle (the thin, impoverished farmer) and his cows rounded the bend. Both ladies leapt up to head the cows off from neighbouring properties (including their own). Vozelle's limp seems worse every time I see him. We wondered aloud whether he and his wife would ever be able to retire; agricultural pensions are very low, and the speculation is that he wouldn't have afforded his contributions anyway. His was the barn that burnt down a few years ago (and was somehow - the village doubted he

had insurance cover - rebuilt). In recent weeks the road past his farm was closed as another barn, the wooden tractor shed, was leaning perilously over the road. In the next few days he must have got some relatives to help cut some of the remaining uprights so it collapsed more gracefully, inwards. It must have been too unsafe to remove much as now it is just a heap of jagged timbers and roof tiles resting on the contents.

Interestingly, the shopkeeper's friend concluded at the end of our lengthy consideration of village affairs, "now I have been introduced to you, I will be able to chat to you next time we met". (Introductions are obviously as important in Entre-deux-Eaux as they were in Paris for the author of "The Piano Shop on the left Bank").

And now an abrupt switch from destruction to liberty. A large white tower was created for the Tuileries Gardens in Paris to celebrate the bi-centenary of the French revolution. In 1990 the tower was acquired by St Dié. Apparently it looks like a huge white metal bird, spreading its wings above St Dié (which, you will remember, is the centre of geography). I like the fact that all the town's street furniture like lamp posts, bridge rails, benches and kiosks have been done in matching styles (white and metallic and possibly bird-like). Naturally, St Dié now holds an annual celebratory week or Semaine de Liberté. Last year we were quite disappointed with the lack of Entre-deux-Eaux fireworks or other festivities on Bastille Day (July 14th); our shopkeeper said that was due to lack of finance. So the week of street theatre in the shadow of the Tower of Liberty and culminating on Bastille Day, was particularly welcome.

It seemed appropriate that Ann, as well as my mother, were here to join in the Semaine de Liberté as both the Harts and my mother have been regular visitors (not to mention occasional slave-labour) over the 12 years since we bought the farmhouse. So on Saturday we left John happily engaged erecting kitchen shelves (more later about the kitchen) and drove into St Dié. We wandered through the fair-ground along the river-bank, where, amid the hot-dogs, candy-floss, hook-a-duck and roundabouts, the mayor and his usual entourage were doing their usual publicity act, being seen greeting the hoi-polloi (including us). Below the Tour de la Liberté, the marionettes were being returned to their boxes, but Bimbo's Beach, promising relief from stress and fatigue, lured Ann into its enclosure. Unsurprisingly, my mother was horrified at the conjunction of bimbos and beaches (despite the fact that small children seemed to be the major participants), so I wheeled her round the fruit and vegetable market, then we all had coffee together in a street café. After that we watched a brilliant trio of street acrobats, who'd incorporated their acts into a loose story, performed mainly top of their battered old touring van (apart from the uni-cyclist, who needed a bit more space!). The "Tyrolean" crossings of the river Meurthe were still permitted, as no fishing or (intentional) swimming was involved, and we watched one lady come to a halt on the ropes mid-river, unable to gain the momentum to continue. Following adaptations, the small children who succeeded her were more successful.

Sad to say, following the heat of the day and the wine with dinner, none of us apart from Ann had the energy to go and see the fireworks that weekend, so

lazed on the balcony awaiting the distant bangs. However, entertainment was provided one evening before sunset by the hot air balloon which is based in the next village of Saulcy-sur-Meurthe. As it approached over the hill from Saulcy, it descended as if to land and then rose, travelled further on and then descended and rose again. After several such manoeuvres, we came to the conclusion that a new pilot was having a great time practising. It was all fun to watch and prompted my mother to remark that she'd always fancied a balloon trip. (If only we'd known earlier, it could have been her ninety-second birthday outing, instead of a tame lunch at a pleasant restaurant over the hills in Alsace!)

Continuing the aviation theme, John and I did visit the exhibition on Renée Fonck, which we alluded to in the last newsletter. Fonck was born and brought up in Saulcy-sur-Meurthe, and the village was keen to re-establish his importance. He was in fact the First World War French ace with the greatest number of hits, though is rarely shown now in history books. It would appear that he was not a charismatic, or even attractive, figure, unlike his rival. The exhibition showed newspaper accounts and photos of his victories, then cuttings from the twenties of his visits to see German aces whom he admired – such as Himmler. He also made several unsuccessful attempts to fly across the Atlantic. After that, silence. One is left to deduce that he supported the Vichy government and may have collaborated to some extent with the Germans during the Second World War. The exhibition focus during that period shifted to his sister, who married a man whose name now marks the main road through Saulcy; he led a local resistance group and they both sheltered an American pilot until they were denounced, arrested, and taken to concentration camps, where he died. She, however, was thrown off the lorry, survived, and was decorated after the war. There were no cuttings about Fonck till his death. It would be interesting to fill in the gaps.

Finally, a few more loose ends from the last newsletter. Firstly, kitchen is almost complete. On the evening that we picked Ann up from Strasbourg airport we made the predictable visit to IKEA and bought the shelving, rails bars and hooks we'd considered. John put them up rapidly despite having to replace several drill bits whilst drilling the hard sky blue tiles he'd put up. Yesterday we unpacked the last of the cardboard boxes down in the barn, sorting the things we hastily packed last year into new kitchen, old kitchen, flea market, and dustbin piles. This also enabled us to calculate the amount of additional shelving we still need for the new kitchen. (IKEA here we come).

Secondly, the tottering old lady finally sent us a detailed itemised quotation for a new staircase up to the attic. It was printed on flowery paper, but unfortunately included no pictures or diagrams, which makes it hard to visualise what the rather higher than expected quote would provide, let alone whether it is a "modern" or "traditional" style. More research needed. Thirdly, the yellow paint in the old dining room is a lovely rich colour, and the Hannah Cauet plaque looks good on it. Fourthly, the old school-house on the hillside has been sold (sadly not to friends, so we may never see how the new owners transform it!)

The thunder which was rolling round the hills when I started writing was followed by lightning and a few spots of rain, but alas nothing of any significance for the gardens and fields. John's return flight pitched a bit more than usual, but was only about ten minutes late and was not too uncomfortable. John's mother has not been well, so he'd wanted to visit her for her birthday. He also enjoyed seeing his sister and family again. And it also worked well to combine his outward trip with Ann's return flight.

Meanwhile, the rest of our family have pursued more exotic travels, with Toby taking a second holiday in Mexico and Leila reaching South America, after a hectic four-day programme in New Zealand which involved geysers, maori dances, a "zorb" (which she described as rolling down a hill in a huge hamster ball), sky diving, and black water rafting. As if that wasn't excitement enough, following a journey through the Bolivian salt flats (more geysers plus altitude sickness), they're off to the Amazon jungle for a bit of alligator spotting, snake hunting, piranha fishing, monkey spotting, and swimming with pink dolphins in a lake(!) Everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux in comparison sounds comatose - but we're content to miss out on the alligators, snakes, and piranhas!