

Year 3 week 13 to 17

Wasps, tractors and vipers: everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux

This time last summer we were bemoaning the intense heat of the canicule which we had been enduring. But this year we are just so pleased to be enjoying September sunshine after a mostly overcast and wet August. Many wet days have been passed browsing nostalgic childhood books (which Helen has been steadily adding to on trips to the UK), genealogical databases like Ancestry (which John has used to confirm and expand his family tree) and donated glossy “Period Living” and “Country Living” magazines (what we could have done with our old farmhouse if only we’d abandoned the scruffy, utilitarian farmhouse image and employed a landscape gardener and trendy architect!)

We are, however, looking slightly more landscaped than last year, due to the purchase (at long last!) of a new, petrol-powered mower (not the sit-on that Helen hankered after, as various bits of our ground are too bumpy and with too many obstacles to make such a beast worthwhile). So John has extended the regular field mowing into the orchard. Unfortunately the old stumps and new suckers provided frequent obstacles and a fatal blow by a hidden tree stump soon bent the crankshaft. Quotes for repairs were astronomical - we could almost have invested in a new one! Fortunately a consultation over beers with Pierre Laine, proved useful. Before the beer he couldn’t think of any current repairers (all his generation of artisans having recently retired), but by the end of a glass he recalled a workshop in a small village nearby. Within 3 days our mower was repaired for about a third of the price we’d been previously quoted in St Dié, and the mower (and John) were back at work in the orchard.

Other obstacles which need to be carefully mown around include various old implements. Neglected heaps of rusting metal, festooned with cobwebs, had lain for years in the barns until the arrival of the scrap metal man. We rescued the most interesting and turned them into garden art. One day, a man, a dog and a young girl stopped outside the house. The man pointed at the windows. It sounded as if he was reminiscing. Irresistible. I emerged from the vegetable patch. The man had lived as a child with his grandparents in our house. The window shutters are different styles because he and his grandfather had salvaged them from different old houses. As we chatted, his eye fell on our garden “ornaments”. As the dog scampered round the orchard and the girl looked bored, he explained that the rusty container now planted with glowing French marigolds and nasturtiums used to be the boiler which heated the water for the weekly wash in the wash-house. He looked in vain for the wash-house, which alas had collapsed under the weight of the house roof which came crashing down through it during the great storm of 1999. The boiler also featured in the distilling process. The object propped against a plum tree was an old blade sharpener. He showed John exactly how the plough blades reclining by the “pond” (aka old sink) fitted onto the tractor. Ah yes, the old tractor. He and his grandfather had driven it back (on a trailer) from a village in distant Champagne when they’d purchased it second -hand. And the axle of the old hay cart! That cart was really heavy when fully loaded and being

dragged up the ramp to the hay loft. You had to have a pulley at the top and the tractor pulling in the opposite direction down below. And if you didn't hang on to the cart and keep it in the tracks - well! When grandpa had had a few drinks, it was not unknown for the hay cart to come crashing down from the ramp, disgorging all its load. And of course, under the ramp grandma had all her rabbit hutches. And how many cows did these fields support? Five. It was gratifying to have these tales of yesteryear provoked by our lawn obstacles / ornaments.

John long ago had another simple idea for one of the meadows. A wild flower meadow (it still has some secretive orchids as well as flamboyant dandelions, buttercups, marguerites, purple loosestrife and meadow sweet) with mown paths winding through it. "Country Living" obligingly showed lavish photos of the immaculately mown spiral wild flower meadow recently created in the former kitchen gardens of Harewood House. But our oblong meadow with its sewage inspection lids and cowpats (left by straying cows) would never achieve that precision and elegance. Wretched aspirational magazines!

After a very indifferent summer, is it going to be a cold winter? The heather on the mountains are standing upright and in full flower, and our autumn crocuses (*colchicums*) have appeared earlier than usual in the orchard (but not in the surrounding fields).

We recently saw another fascinating decorative idea in the small village of Jussarupt. We'd gone there for a flea market. We'd enjoyed a lunchtime snack of excellent white sausage and chips (with generous slice of brie thrown in). We'd also bought three books printed in the forties and illustrated with attractive woodcuts. (An aside: one was a collection of Kipling short stories with valiant attempts to translate Stalkey & Co's Edwardian schoolboy slang, including *chouette* *fids et gloats pour nous!* but with the sad footnote that there is no French equivalent for "By Gum", - but then *fids* and *gloats* don't feature in our French dictionaries either). But back to the plot. At the far end of the village, a man who used to work in the timber mill had, since its closure, decorated the whole of the façade of his house and barn with bundles of fire-wood in different sizes, all forming intricate and attractive patterns. Nicola felt it merited a painting in her Vosgian life series. But perhaps it's too much of a fire hazard to imitate.

We haven't had too many "finds" from flea-markets recently. But John's ultimate bargain is a pretty little modern cigarette lighter with grape vine decorations (always useful when the gas hob ignition fails). And Helen's is a book of photographs of Paris. It might sound as if there was nothing unusual about the latter. But it is quite a curiosity. It was published by the Verlag der Deutschen Arbeitsfront Paris in October 1942 and called "Paris: Wanderung durch eine Stadt". But I need someone to translate the introduction. Is it a tourist book for the anticipated wave of German tourists to occupied Paris? The photos all look very tranquil with no hint of war or occupation.

This week's flea markets took us past the splendid baroque Benedictine abbey rising from the maize fields of the tiny Alsace plains village of Ebersmunster.

The original abbey, it turned out, was founded by the very Saint Deodatus who four years later moved on to found our own St Dié-des-Vosges.

Another old Benedictine abbey was our destination on one of the rare sunny days of August. Nicola had read about the abbey of Saint Maur at Bleurville last autumn, too late for its brief July to September (afternoon only) season of opening. Entre-deux-Eaux lies in the far east of our *département* of the Vosges; Bleurville lies in the far west, by road some 80 miles away. So we decided to make a day of it. And what a glorious day's meandering it was. Though we did go faster than the cart horses pulling wooden caravans (sadly box-like new ones rather than bright, curvy gypsy caravans!). We passed several throughout the day. And on the very hilly, pre-planned routes they seemed to be following, the renters were often trudging alongside in sympathy with the horse, so it didn't have quite as much to pull! The caravans seem to be the latest thing in tourism over in "the west" - and for hire at only 800 euros a week. We stopped at ornate old stone crosses, Romanesque churches (a word of caution about the sacristan who kept patting Nicola fondly and often!), a cowshed tantalisingly labelled both "Roman mosaic" and "closed" and a hilltop walled renaissance village (sadly many of the restored buildings seemed abandoned). We lunched alongside the local firemen and women in a restaurant in one of the larger villages and plunged into the forests to find the oldest working glassworks in France, with its display of brilliant, glowing mushroom shaped table lamps and slender glassware. After all these activities, Bleurville Abbey was now open. And how different it was from the over-the-top white-and-gold baroque splendour of Ebersmunster. For despite its ancient foundation (11th century crypt) this stone Romanesque abbey had been used as a barn since it was sold off after the French Revolution. We had a very interesting guide (though I hope she's since checked that the English were not ravaging the countryside of Lorraine, or even France, during the Thirty Years' War - Lorraine is the birthplace of Joan d'Arc and even today there is simmering resentment at England's, and thus our, role in her martyrdom, which by a curious logic seems also to prove us responsible for all other historical evils to befall France). Leaving its neglected bare walls, we headed home, stopping briefly to inspect a tall spire-like monument which rose up unexpectedly in the middle of a hayfield near Darney. It turned out to be the Czech Monument. During the first world war Darney was the assembly point for the Czech and Slovak volunteers who had come to fight in France. And in June 1918 French President Poincaré presented a standard to them as the first army of the newly founded state. A more varied day than usual, spanning as it did Romans, Benedictines and Czechs and Slovaks!

The St Dié group whose walks I join in summer is making an effort to include a bit of local history as we pause. This has been much appreciated by both tourists and regulars (and I feel I am finally perceived seen as passing from the first category to the second). On the first walk everyone was fascinated to hear about the military garrison at Fraize during the first world war (of which only the huge shooting range remains on the hillside) and about the Swiss chapel on top of the hill (that explanation commencing with a little joke, "Now we all know that a Swiss is a Belgian trying to find his way home! But we have to remember that in this case it is a verger in a Protestant Church"). However, the talk of the people who'd grown up locally turned to vipers. The Swiss

Chapel was a place where vipers nested. As children in the farms below, everyone had to wear long boots when the fields were being harvested, and they were scared of playing round the Swiss Chapel. I pricked up my ears at this, as our friend Nicola, who lives a couple of miles below the Chapel, had suffered a tremendous shock when she came home one hot, dry afternoon back in July to find her large black dog Suki (a Labrador/Alsatian? cross) in the garden dying from venom in one leg. Despite the fact that she later found a viper skin on the road one morning, her neighbours still vehemently insist that there have never ever been vipers in the area.

Another walk was led by a man I was pretty sure would not pause to give information. Fernand tends to put his head down, start walking and keep walking. But he'd brought along his friend Claude to give a bit of background. Unfortunately Claude had also been assigned the responsible position at the rear of the strung-out group. So when he wanted to give information on the tiny source of a mighty river, a shelter from the first world war or a chapel in the valley below, he had to blow his whistle to get the entire party in front of him to stop. About half way through Claude's explanation, Fernand would get fed up with standing still and would blow his whistle and set off walking briskly to make up for wasted time. This happened several times, with Claude getting more and more frustrated. They made a hilarious double act!

On the last walk the guide seemed a bit vague. Perhaps he didn't agree with the new policy of informing the masses. "I suppose I should have found out why they put a statue to the Virgin up here, far from anywhere" However, I wished he'd been a bit more communicative when someone trod on a wasp's nest in the middle of a narrow path with steep wooded slopes on either side. It would have been useful if he'd stopped everyone following and organised both a detour and the first aid kit. At the end of the walk, as stung walkers tended each other, he asked vaguely, "how many people got stung?" and looked vaguely surprised when 14 people raised their hands. He should have calculated the total number of stings - I had five.

However, we'll conclude close at hand with the Entre-deux-Eaux walk. This is a walk organised annually on the last Sunday of August by the village social committee. This is grander than an ordinary walk, because there are refreshment stations round the course and a grand buffet at the end. Now although we've done the walk most years, we've never booked the meal. And in fact inhabitants of Entre-deux-Eaux can eat without walking! But we planned to both walk and eat this year. So we were disappointed that it was a wet week and that, despite a forecast of improved weather, we woke to rain. The walk route went past our house, and from the bathroom window we could see early walkers passing in their macs and under umbrellas (It's the kind of walk which you can start at any time of day. But most people calculate carefully so that they'll arrive back at the village hall just as aperitifs and lunch are being served - starting times obviously depending on whether they've opted for the 12 or 17 km route!). Our Mandray friends took one look at the rain and rang to say they weren't coming. But we were made of sterner stuff. Because of the rain (!) we drove down to the starting point, paid our participation fee, met up with Chantal, one of the St Dié walking group, and set off back down the road back past our house and off across the fields. When we'd got to that familiar

stage when your plastic poncho is drenched on the outside with rain and you're drenched on the inside with perspiration (and when my trusty walking boots abandoned their twenty years of service and leaked uncomfortably through their soles), the sun came out and we started to steam dry. At the check-in stations we had our papers stamped (serious stuff, this village walking), and drank coffee and chatted to other walkers, then set out again. It was very peaceful. The huntsmen's guns and horns were silent and the secretive mushroom pickers kept hidden. So the midst of the peaceful forest, on a pretty footpath we'd never walked before, it was a bit annoying to catch up with a lady shouting down her mobile phone. Was it merely, "We're in the forest..."? John thought she was unsportingly getting help with the quiz questions on the card; (we'd left ours blank, having omitted to bring our dictionary and being ignorant of the French for "catkin"). We overtook the silence-shatterers, and crossed a recently harvested field, from the top of which we could look down on our familiar church tower and village hall ... and its buffet. The village social committee had done us proud (and the other 150 or so who had turned up for the meal, if not the walk). A bracing aperitif was thrust into our hands, and after bidding Chantal farewell, we went into the hall where trestles were spread with dishes of hot stuffed pancakes (hors d'oeuvre), cold meats, fish, salads, and hot potatoes in cream sauce, and generous portions of cheese. After our heaped platters, it was quite an effort to get up and fetch an ice cream cone from the bar, followed by coffee. Not surprisingly, the bar had also been doing a good trade in bottles of wine (reminiscent of the famous occasion when Entre-deux-Eaux hosted an accordion concert). Though it did seem to be the non-walkers who were knocking back the most wine!

So, with those festivities resounding, and with the grander neighbouring festivities of the International Patchwork Convention and International Geography Festival (is the theme really "Food"?) to come before Autumn sets in, it's "Cheers" to everyone, from a finally sunny Entre-deux-Eaux.