

Year 3 week 25 to 31

Burning Bush, Firemen's Ball and Advent: everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux

It proved surprisingly difficult to find any fireworks. With friends arriving from Nottingham on 5th November, an appropriate welcome had originally seemed to be a party, fireworks, bonfire, and Guy Fawkes. We checked with our local retired fireman He looked a bit startled at the prospect of his English neighbours burning effigies of Catholic plotters, but said that letting off fireworks in the middle of the countryside would not be a problem for cows or neighbours. However, local stores were less obliging. They contained stacks of seasonal scary halloween masks, plastic pumpkins, inflatable santas and tinsel, but no fireworks until nearer New Year. Our meagre bonfire ingredients were also sodden from weeks of rain. So we concluded that a large indoor dinner would be more enjoyable, even if a bit sedate.

John therefore made dinner preparations and we set out to pick up Sue, Alistair and their son Oliver from Basel airport. On the way back we lingered in one of our favourite gabled Alsace villages, Eguisheim - patisseries in the *salon de thé*, followed by wine tasting amid gigantic oak barrels in sixteenth century vaults. We got back to messages from Nicola and Dorinda: in a fit of depression at the US election results, Nicola had made a substantial effigy of George W. Bush out of straw from Dorinda and Roger's hayloft; then her retired-patisserie-making friends had told her of a tiny magic shop opposite their former patisserie (alas, now a hairdresser's). Amid the magical tricks the shopkeeper did indeed have fireworks, which he was so delighted to sell out-of-season (even to the anti-Catholic foreigners) that he threw in a large squat mystery freebie. Whilst his family recovered from their 4 am start, Alistair scouted round for good (but not too good) wood to burn and constructed a platform and stake support for George W.

So that evening, we ate our way through a large meal, then put on boots and warm coats, admired George W in his fetching shirt, leggings and blue cap, and lit the bonfire. The dry straw burnt very quickly and G.W. soon vanished from sight. The fireworks, mainly rockets and aerial shells, lasted longer, with soaring sprays of colour and bangs that reverberated round a worryingly large area between the hills. The Catherine wheel presented problems as the touchpaper was tucked well out of sight and probing, but was eventually found. Finally only the mystery firework remained. And what a finale. It made strange, piercing, whining sounds worthy of a Harry Potter magic firework, appeared to fall silent, then started up again - and was it really jumping up and down like a frog at the same time?

Two days later, towards the end of a walk, we saw three huntsmen picturesquely immobile against the late afternoon sky. (Incidentally, do not imagine huntsmen in scarlet jackets with dogs and horses. Here the uniform is more a dark felt brimmed hat, brown or camouflaged many-pocketed-jacket, and leather boots. The steeds are 4x4s driven at speed along roads and tracks and across fields). One was our neighbour, Pierre Laine, who lowered his gun and shook hands politely. "Did you enjoy your fireworks?" he asked. Since

they'd been shooting all day and had bagged a boar and a roe deer, we didn't worry too much after that about having disturbed the peace or the wildlife.

Hats also featured at the Firemen's Ball. This was held the night after our fireworks. It had caused us some debate about what the dress code for a village firemen's ball would be. Sue and I opted for casual elegance whilst the men opted for casual, Alistair sporting his favourite canoeing broad-brimmed leather hat. The firemen themselves wore their navy T-shirts and trainers (ready for action - see below). Their wives, partners and daughters who were serving the meal wore elegant black numbers. The rest, it has to be said, were rather a hotch-potch. Apart from a stunning scarlet sheath dress, the ladies' outfits that remain in my mind are an extremely skimpy black mini (on a diminutive 40 year old), so skimpy that it permanently revealed a stripe of white flesh above her black stocking tops. As she was extremely fond of dancing, we were aware of her stocking tops throughout the evening. It was a distinctly sleazy effect. Another memorable outfit was a pink hand-knitted pullover with a tartan pleated mini-skirt and black striped tights. Elegant was not the word - lumpy, perhaps. The nattiest dresser was a small man in a black shirt, whose familiarity with complex steps, turns and glides led us to refer to him as the dancing master.

The orchestra was superb. We'd been warned to sit well away from the musicians if we wished to converse. However the leader soon had a floor full of dancers, gliding, jumping, clapping and jerking (*le jerk* was one of those useful French Scrabble words I'd encountered, though couldn't visualise when informed that it was an English word from the sixties. Anyone out there remember doing the jerk?) The trumpet player was particularly impressive. The waitresses managed to bring the plates of food between the dancers to the long tables of diners, without a spill. We were very touched, because, knowing that we were bringing English friends, the partner of one of the firemen had laboriously translated the menus into English for our table - kir, Fisherman's plate, Pork and its mushrooms garnishing, Grated potatoes, lettuce, cheese. But she'd given up at *île flottante* which was not in her dictionary, and was very anxious about this failure, so we assured her that the French words were considered very sophisticated on English menus, but otherwise the literal floating islands were fine. This was the first time any one in the village has attempted written English, so it was very touching and welcoming.

And the hats? As the evening wore on (and who says the French never drink to excess?) one of the dancers began to doff his black felt hat to Alistair, and another took a fancy to Alistair's own hat and borrowed it for a few circuits of the dance floor). Sue and Alistair bravely joined in a dance which turned into an all-going-under-a-long-arch kind of dance. John and I contented ourselves with a slow shuffle. (I don't think I've seen a foxtrot, quickstep, tango or cha-cha since those long-ago school dances). In the early hours of the morning, long after the last coffee and chocolates had been served, and as Sue, Alistair and Oliver were making their way to the car and John and I were doing our farewell shuffle, an inebriated young man who'd been provoking everyone all evening, finally succeeded in starting a fight right by our feet. All the young braves (including the hat-borrower) leapt in. Whereupon the firemen showed their rigorous training and fitness, breaking up the fight by sitting on each of

the participants and immobilising them. The *agent provocateur* was released into the cold night air, and the rest returned sheepishly to their partners. We slipped into the cold night air too.

After visitors who'd arrived hard on the heels of a very picturesque snowfall, our next visitors were John's sister Ann and brother-in-law Derek, keen to see the Christmas Markets we'd described in previous years. This was quite a challenge, as we usually only spend one day a week in Advent, as in summer, at markets. John wasn't sure he could cope with four days in succession as he hates crowds, twee shops and twee Christmas villages. However, we practised the week before their arrival, with the tiny Lorraine village that has one evening when the barns round the village green are illuminated and craftsmen display their wares. Regrettably, this year the lights were gaudier (a good few prancing reindeer and Santas) and some of our favourite craftsmen were absent.

So when Ann and Derek landed at Basel on the first weekend in December, we started off simply at nearby Mulhouse. This is less touristy than other big Alsace markets, Mulhouse being more famous for its manufacturing heritage (it has good museums of printed fabrics, wallpaper, railways, fire engines, electricity, and the wonderful sounding Schlumpf vintage car collection). It creates a special Christmas fabric each year and every fountain and statue in the centre of the city was swathed in this year's delicate holly fabric. A bit different! It was dark by the time we reached the main square, and the lights in the gabled old council chamber in the Hotel de Ville were alluring, so we looked inside and discovered the old wooden toys displayed downstairs and the Alsace furniture and an artist's modern wooden "toys" (some of them funny, some sexy, some whimsical) upstairs. Back in the cold outside, the smell of mulled wine was intoxicating. The horses on the roundabout pranced, whilst others careered on a jerky rail through the trees and illuminations of another square. It was a magical introduction. And the mulled wine, the *choucroute* (cabbage) and sausage, the *tartiflette* (potato onion and bacon mush), the finger doughnuts and the pancakes with *Grand Marnier* were delicious!

On the Saturday morning we started well at Kaysersburg, where the glass makers were blowing, the church was awe-inspiring, Ann spotted the carved wooden Nutcracker figures she'd longed for (the gabled shop had stone steps up to it, baskets and toys hanging round the doorway, and shelves crammed with china, cribs, decorations, biscuit cutting tools), the old water mill displayed lovely marquetry and watercolours - and the mulled wine was rather potent. Flushed with success (and wine) we wended our way through the vineyards to the famous markets at Colmar which in contrast seemed dreadfully crowded, tacky, noisy and cold.

These three big markets were all Alsace ones, which have much in common, we gather, with the German ones. Our own area of Lorraine has only recently cottoned on. "A bit like school fund-raising fêtes" was Ann's verdict when we returned from three small local ones on Sunday. These were in whatever large hall the village owned. One village hangar (possibly a school sports hall) contained a goat, some water colours, jam, fruit wines, a good charcuterie

display by the local butcher, more jam, some crocheted nasties, an unattended “guess the weight” basket of comestibles, some holly and mistletoe and a bread stall. However we did come home with lunch - some wonderful smoked ham, some cheese from another market and some very fresh bread!

So we enjoyed the richness of the Alsace Markets again on the Monday when we stopped for the afternoon at Strasbourg, on our way to the tiny airport at Baden-Baden. We’d had a substantial lunch at one of our regular restaurants *en route*, and were glad to stroll along the Strasbourg canal-side promenades. When we reached the cathedral, the stalls clustering at its foot looked tiny. The interior of Strasbourg cathedral has always reminded me in summer of a noisy railway station with crowds rushing in different directions in pursuit of tour guides with raised umbrellas. But at dusk, in Advent, with only the candles to illuminate it, and huge rich tapestries enfolding the nave, it was more mysterious than usual (though Death performed his normal feat of striking the hour on gilded astronomical clock). We strolled round five markets, one of them a Polish one, and one with a huge Christmas tree. We stopped for hot chocolate and coffee in one of those traditional brasseries where the waiters all wear black waistcoats and long white aprons. We even got a shop-keeper on one of the elegant boulevards to open up again for us, for Ann to purchase a silver vase decorated with dragon flies, that she’d been searching for both in France and London!

The weekend of their visit was also the one when St Nicolas, being patron saint of Lorraine, is particularly rigorous in visiting every town and village to find out how the children have been behaving. We’d watched him arrive in St Dié behind twenty three floats of school children and adults dressed as clowns and circus animals. He looked very tall and dignified, and even the adults in front of us gasped in excitement. Apparently he knocks on the cathedral door and vanishes within, as the fireworks go off around the square. But the procession had taken so long that we’d returned to Entre-deux-Eaux for dinner by then.

However, when he arrived at the village hall at Entre-deux-Eaux the next afternoon, both he and his wicked side-kick Père Fouettard looked less dignified. His bishop’s crozier was only made of white cardboard and his voice boomed at the children through a hand-held microphone. Père Fouettard had a wine-grower’s basket on his back. And they were both wearing very sinister dark glasses and impressively large beards. A Mafia-like duo (but presumably their children didn’t recognise them!). Good children were given sweets and bad children had their ears tweaked (and then they were given sweets too). More sweets could be won by singing or reciting half-remembered snatches (no better than the small children who sing half a verse of “jingle bells” on English doorsteps before ringing your doorbell).

Our mayor didn’t put in an appearance until after the Saint had gone (and no, he hadn’t been disguised as Nicolas or Fouettard) and the cartoon film was about to be shown. Perhaps he was as unwilling to mix sacred and secular (the mayor, after all does not preside over a parish but a commune) as the primary school teacher John saw quoted in *Le Figaro* who, on opening boxes of the chocolate Saint Nicolas traditionally distributed in schools, glimpsed

"something unthinkable". The saint was wearing a "conspicuous religious symbol" - a cross - "a clear and blatant slap in the face of the Republic". The teacher "hastened to the town hall to sound the alarm" and the 1,300 sweet Nicolases were instantly recalled. A search was launched for chocolate figures "in keeping with republican neutrality", but as "finding a secular saint is a devil of a job, the council ended up making do with nice round sweets and chocolate bars instead".

Political correctness gone mad! Just as well we didn't ask the Mayor about whether we could celebrate Guy Fawkes night in his commune. All we've asked him about recently is whether we can re-construct a garage. John has acquired some large woodworking machinery. Once he has installed lighting and heating in the atelier (formerly the village electrician's workshop) he will be able to indulge in serious woodworking. Meanwhile the old tractor is having to sit outside (though John had prepared it for a hard winter ahead by dealing with the rust and repainting it). So far it's only had to withstand snow and temperatures of -6°C. We also applied at the mairie to vote in European elections. We haven't had a response to either yet.

You'll have gathered from this year's accounts that we've enjoyed all our visitors. Our last one of the year arrives tomorrow - Leila. She also wants to see Christmas Markets and is going to do three days of dog-sitting for Nicola. But if you fancy a holiday with a difference in 2005, John has the following information:

The Tour de France is coming our way next July with a stage start in Lunéville which is about 30mins drive from E2E and a stop and start in Gérardmer, which is about 20 minutes drive (Friday 8 July 225 km Lunéville > Karlsruhe; Saturday 9 July 235 km Pforzheim > Gérardmer; Sunday 10 July 170 km Gérardmer > Mulhouse). The detailed first and second day routes have not been announced but I suspect the second day will pass over the Vosges at the col de Schlucht to avoid disrupting the traffic too much. The third day is the first of the mountain stages and the route has been announced. So if there is anyone keen to see the event we've got room to sleep 6-8 (and a few acres of field for those with mole-proof groundsheets!). More information on the Tour at <http://www.letour.fr/2005/presentationus/index.html>

In the meantime we wish you all *Joyeuses Fêtes!*