

Hair rollers, herrings and spindles: the passing of our fourth winter in Entre-deux Eaux: Year 4 weeks 44 - 52

St Joseph's day came and went on 19th March without the winter snow responding to the old adage by vanishing. However this first week in May (which marks the end of our fourth year living in Entre-deux-Eaux) has also provided two rather more reliable indicators that the long winter is finally over. Firstly, Farmer Duhaut's cows are out grazing. Secondly, this weekend the Gérardmer heavy equipment team are out clearing the Route des Crêtes, along the ridge of the Vosges mountains.

As far as the first indicator is concerned, it is the cows of Farmer Duhaut not those of Farmer Vozelle that you have to observe. Like most of the farmers locally, Duhaut watches the weather forecasts and plans systematically. As the snow in our valley melted, he and his partner Olivier were out spraying muck over all his pastures. Then when rain was forecast they were out spreading fertilizer, which would need to be watered in. However even his best friends could not call Farmer Vozelle systematic. We have long been amused by the sight of the Vozelle cows going out in the summer heat to graze at midday and returning just before midnight by the light of the tractor headlights. It was not so funny seeing the poor beasts out in the field behind their stable in this winter's thick snow, with not a blade of grass in sight. One April night at 11 pm, after a good meal out, we were returning along the road past his farm. Fortunately we were driving slowly, as his chickens are often out on the road (free range!). So we spotted the blue string tied tautly across the road between his farmhouse and stable. Beyond the blue string, cows loomed out of the dark field, plodding back to their shed for midnight. Behind them, flourishing a big stick strode dumpy Mme Vozelle. She was wearing a long dressing gown and her hair was pulled tight into enormous rollers. It was like encountering Ena Sharples in a French country lane.

As far as the second indicator is concerned, the Gérardmer snow clearing team obviously know best. In March it was announced that the Grand Ballon, one of the highest points of the Vosges mountains, had experienced the deepest snow in living memory. I had been on a memorable snowy walk with the local history society through the long zig-zagging snow-filled First World War German trenches in the the Vosges ridges above us at Ban de Sapt. Even in our valley, Roger and Dorinda had to fix their snow chains on their car wheels before coming round to dinner one night. But the following week, the worst of snow really seemed to us novices to be over and the spring thaw had commenced. Not only was our valley clear, but we couldn't see whiteness on the hills above. We were still impatient to try out the new Blanche Neige restaurant. It had been opened by a chef who had previously worked at the renowned Auberge de l'ill, and it had already been awarded 15/20 points in the 2006 Gault Millau guide. So, confident in the ability of the snow ploughs to keep the major Vosges passes clear at all times, we set out to cross Col de Bonhomme pass and lunch at the Blanche Neige.

Roger and Dorinda must have set out in their car about five minutes before we

set out in ours. The sky was grey, but nothing alarming. But as we started to climb up to the pass, a fine driving snow started. A snow plough promptly appeared in front of us, and we crawled up behind it. At the pass, our snow plough turned round as it had reached the departmental boundary. We started the descent. Unfortunately the Alsace snow plough had not started as promptly with clearing the other side. Snow was settling fast on that side of the pass, and oncoming lorries were getting stuck as they slewed across the road, their wheels spinning. As we branched off the main road and climbed up hill again, the visibility was very poor. Everything was white and we ended up in a private garden instead of the Blanche Neige car park, having been misled by a half-observed sign. When we finally found the restaurant, the dapper waiters were out shovelling snow to clear the entrance. Roger and Dorinda, having started out five minutes ahead us, had arrived half an hour before us. They were snugly ensconced with glasses of champagne. No other diners had made it through the snow!

Secure in the knowledge that hotel rooms were available for the night, should the snow worsen, we settled down to enjoy the long-anticipated meal. The waiters were most attentive, and the chef prepared a wonderful meal (despite, we later discovered, being anxious himself about getting home; he still lives down on the Rhine plain near Colmar, where the swollen river Ill was expected to burst its banks and flood his and other villagers' cellars). I shall long remember that meal (and the restaurant should gain at least one Michelin star next year?). As we sat isolated in the warmth of the old barn gallery, with whiteness and silence outside, one subtly spiced dish succeeded another. When we sat back elegantly replete at 3 o'clock, we realised that the sun had come out, shifting the white veil, and revealing a stunning view down onto the Rhine plain and the Black Forest mountains beyond.

As much of that day's snow had melted, we took a slightly different route back through the vineyards and Roger spotted another restaurant which looked interesting. So a few days later, we sampled the menu at l'Agneau in Katzenthal. This time there were no snow problems. Lunch was good and we had a pleasant postprandial stroll up to the old castle ruins in the wintry sunshine. Roger and Dorinda decided to buy some of the wine we'd had with our lunch. The producer's courtyard next to the restaurant was a hive of industry. Although the small wine growers/producers have their own equipment for bottling and corking most of the wines, the small amount of crémant (Alsace's sparkling wine *méthode champenoise*) they produce needs specialist bottling equipment which they hire. So, as we tasted various other wines, we watched the hose pipe prosaically pumping bubbly into the rotating bottles which were then temporarily crown-capped, stacked, and transported back the cellars for their second fermentation.

However, life isn't all elegant dining. John's friend Alistair had agreed to fly out at the beginning of April to help again with ongoing building projects. I prudently spent the week in Nottingham. Objective number one was to make more room in the attic by removing the inside chimney stack, having first taken down the external chimney stack and roofed over the hole before it

snowed or rained,. The weather forecast for the week was bad. So they started work on laying the remaining attic flooring and also on tree pruning (followed by the production of wood chippings for the garden). Suddenly the weather improved for a whole afternoon, and photos reveal Alistair sitting inside the external chimney stack, dismantling it around him. Objective number two was to sort and move a pile of timber to make way for rebuilding one of the garages (the original lean-to had long disappeared in the demolition prior to the conversion of the "West Wing"). When that was achieved, the rubble from the chimney was shifted to form part of the new garage floor foundations. The builders' merchant then delivered three cubic metres of ready-mixed concrete, which John and Alistair rapidly smoothed into an even surface over the rubble. Unfortunately, equally rapidly, snow started to fall just after they'd finished. It settled on the plastic covering and inconsiderately pitted the surface - but trowelling the following day again gave a smooth surface.

As a reward for the week's hard work we all (by this time Alistair's wife and daughter had returned with me from Nottingham) set out for the *Foire aux Harengs* at Moyeu-moutier. It turned into an occasion for puns about red herrings. For a start, it was not held at Moyeu-moutier after all. However, the *boulangerie* helpfully directed us to the village of St Blaise, about 7km away. And for another thing, there weren't many herrings to be seen. A single stall, not much bigger than a sentry box, was selling herring patties and herring pâté. But beyond it all the other stalls were of second hand clothing, books and ornaments. A flea market really, rather than herring market. Such was the quality of the second hand goods that Alistair instituted a "tackiest object" competition. It was won not by the wood-effect moulded plastic plate of Big Ben, nor the sun glasses with blue swirly fifties frames, nor even the Easter chicken object, but by the bottle opener surmounted by yellow rubber breasts which hooted when squeezed. Who said the French had impeccable taste?

A more accurately described festival was last week's *Foire au Lard* at St Rémy. Here there was a whole avenue devoted to stalls selling succulent sides of cured bacon. I'm always thankful that the *lard* festival precedes the serious arrival of the flies. We missed the band before lunch, but had plenty of time to look round the flea-market stalls which radiated out from the central *lard* stalls. And there was lots to look at. We hovered over some attractive engravings of Strasbourg cathedral, bought some preserving jars (at least one for salting lemons for future tagines), spotted a box labelled cannabis (was it only incense sticks?) and admired Dorinda's purchases of a letter rack and an enamel colander/ plant pot.

Last year one of our flea market treasures was a wooden shuttle from a former cotton mill. A regular visitor, Ann, had mentioned that she'd like to find one as a reminder of her father's factories. Many towns and villages here have abandoned cotton mills. Recently, on our way to a flea market, we stopped to admire the lettering on the front of an old mill, which proclaimed Société Cotonnière Lorraine. "Would you like to look round?" asked a man who emerged from a shabby office. Apparently the mayor had decided it would be a good idea to try to restore part of this mill and acquire old machinery to

form a museum of the village's past, when over 1,000 inhabitants worked in two mills. However, for some obscure reason they weren't allowed to call it a museum on a sign outside, just *Mémoires du Textile*. Not surprisingly, given the lack of publicity, we were the only visitors that day (possibly the first this year). We were given the undivided attention of the cast of six former employees. First there was the lady who popped up, welcomed us properly, asked if we were Dutch and sold us our tickets. Then there was our excellent guide. A second man worked a massive spinning machine. Two ladies demonstrated the threading of an older machine and a third man wove some damask, demonstrating how the green and brown threads form a subtle shade. I couldn't even see the wooden shuttles whizzing by, so he slowed everything down for me. At the end we got an effusive farewell from the first lady.

It seems a universal law that Easter Monday should be grey and miserable, so we avoided flea markets that day. But the next few days were gloriously sunny. We liberated our teak benches from their winter tarpaulins, set them under the damson and hazel trees, and sat with coffee and John's Easter Simnel cake, enjoying the carpet of cowslips and ladies' smock under our apple and pear trees. I did hope they'd last till Jennifer's visit the following week.

Nine years ago Jennifer had paid her first visit to Entre-deux-Eaux. In those days we seemed to have regular drainage works! She and I spent an afternoon digging up the cowslips that lay in the path of the excavator and replanting them in the orchard. So we were keen for her to see how well they'd survived and multiplied in the intervening nine years.

As Jennifer's flight arrived in the early afternoon at Basel airport, I had originally thought of taking a leisurely drive back along the Route des Crêtes. This runs just below the ridge of the Vosges, and was built as a supply line in the First World War. In winter it is used as a cross country ski run, but in summer it is a popular tourist route, with good footpath routes and cafés. However, the continuous snow this winter meant that parts of the road were still under two metres of snow, so it was still closed to traffic. So instead, we drove back through wine villages, past the storks in Munster and over the Col de la Schlucht. The vista of snowy ravines below the Route des Crêtes was still impressive. We paused to warm up and relax over cups of hot chocolate, then descended, passing the fields of wild daffodils, to our valley.

We spent a couple of days walking (preparation for Jennifer's adventurous-sounding walking tour in the Crimea), a day in the fairy-tale gabled streets of Kaysersberg, and a morning at the St Die art exhibition. (Our friend Nicola was exhibiting two pictures, one a pencil drawing of Vosgian sheep, and one a painting of last year's pumpkin harvest on our windowsill. We are the proud possessors of the latter, when it is not on show). Then it was time to take Jennifer back to Basel airport. This time on my way home I followed the Rhine for a short way, stopping to look at the lock at the end of the Rhone to Rhine canal, and also at a fabulous octagonal Romanesque church filled with frescoes and soaring song (a soloist rehearsing for the evening's concert). I

later inadvertently got caught up in a wedding procession of cars slowly following a horse-drawn carriage uphill through the vineyards. The horses were driven by top-hatted attendants (one top hat blew off into the vines). The cars (as is traditional) hooted all the way and the wine growers waved at the young couple.

And now, at long last, a week later, the Route des Crêtes has been cleared of snow and opened. We have celebrated the end of our fourth year here with lunch at the Frankenbourg restaurant (still my favourite), without any snow on the passes. In the fields to the south of our window the heifers are frisking excitedly at the novelty of lush grass. And this week M. Laine decreed that the sun, rain, and moon would be most propitious for planting potatoes at 8 a.m. on Tuesday. So on Tuesday (but perhaps nearer to 8 p.m.) our potatoes (BF15 this year) were duly interred. Carrots, beetroot, parsnip, beans, lettuce, dill, coriander, and basil have been sown and well watered in by last night's rain. The annual battle with slugs, rats, moles and birds will soon commence. Yes, spring is officially here now, though it almost feels as if we've skipped straight to summer, so great is the contrast. Enjoy your summer too!