

A load of hot air: boar hunts, balloons, and the big birthday. Everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux, Year 5, weeks 9 - 21

The first sounds we heard on Sunday morning were Farmer Duhaut's cows harrumphing mournfully as they grazed outside the bedroom window. The next sounds were shouts were from the hillside opposite. It was too early for Farmer Vozelle to be shouting at his cows (that doesn't start till mid-day at the earliest). Perhaps someone had lost their dog?

In Nottingham, the first signs of the approach of autumn would be rows of parked cars outside our house as students young and old enrolled for courses at the nearby college. Here, the parked cars along the lanes are four by fours belonging to furtive looking men in hats. As the hillside shouting increased, it dawned on us that September 24th must be the opening day of the 2006 hunting season. The distant sound of a horn confirmed our suspicion, as did the appearance of a young deer bounding from the forest and across the field, skirting the cows and our orchard.

Later, as we were driving out of the village in quest of Sunday flea markets, we passed carloads of men in hats. John noticed that they were wearing red hat bands. As if on cue, our car radio informed us of the start of *la chasse* in the north of France and the need for extra caution in the forests, especially by people gathering mushrooms. As a safety measure, the newsreader continued, red arm bands (or hat bands, it would appear) should be worn by huntsmen. This measure is being credited for a decrease in accidents. Across France in 2004/5 accidents fell by 26% from the previous year to only 177 and the number of fatalities from 29 to 25. It's a bit worrying to learn that among people in no way involved with the hunt, the number of accidents dropped from 23 to a mere 12 over 4 seasons. Maybe those poor mushroom hunters should be the ones adopting luminous waistcoats.

We'll have to ask how many boars our neighbour Pierre Laine's posse bagged. Our own more modest Sunday expedition resulted in only 1 purchase, a hyacinth jar. John was a bit disconcerted when he successfully haggled for a bit of glass (to make a small loo window), only to have a woman snatch it up and hiss, "Well if it's only a Euro now, I'll have it". However, over the summer we've found plenty of bargains to give us pleasure. The most surprising was a boxful of dinner plates, coffee jug, milk jug, serving bowl and small plates from the identical range that John bought in Heals in the early seventies! Spotting these in a tiny adjacent village seemed strange serendipity (and, as a bonus, while eating out chips and ketchup, we watched the best French line dancing group we've seen so far). John has added to his collection of Ultrafex cameras and we have acquired (but not played) an old French Monopoly set with all the Paris stations, streets and utilities (*Rue de la Paix* = Mayfair and *Avenue des Champs Elysées* = Park Lane).

With John's birthday festivities less than a month away, and with the weather improving after a miserably wet August, we have been overcome with an urge to not only make the attic habitable, but also to tart up the flaking farmhouse

paintwork and subdue the garden. Thus it was that on Saturday evening, John was out mowing the grass and I was squatting behind the farmhouse front door (before you ask, I was repainting the inside of the door). From behind the door I heard the roar of air that usually denotes a passing hot air balloon. But it became deafening, as if the balloon was right outside the door. I cursed the tackiness of the wet paint which prevented me from opening the door and checking whether it had landed on our pumpkins and leeks.

When I finally emerged, the huge colourful Saulcy *montgolfière* was hovering right over John's head as he mowed. He appeared oblivious to it, with his ear muffs clamped firmly over his ears to shut out the noise of the petrol mower. It's at times like these that you wish your hands weren't covered in white paint, so that you could snap the drama. Majestically the balloon glided behind our apple trees, then bumped down by the stream. We're becoming a bit blasé about balloons landing in our fields. The surprise was the fiery roar of a second rainbow-striped vehicle in hot pursuit. It must have persuaded its friend to try one last surge towards the main road where anxious support vehicles were lurking.

However, it would seem from a recent colour supplement that Lorraine was always a good area for balloon-spotting. In those happy pre-World War I days, the border with Germany was only a few miles from here, along the summit of the Vosges. So, although the early French dirigibles were built in the suburbs of Paris, they were tested in the frontier garrison towns of Verdun, Toul, Epinal and Belfort. It must have been even more exciting when a German Zeppelin 4 strayed across the border during a military manoeuvre in 1913 and came down at Luneville. Then with the advent of war there must have been all those ponderous and vulnerable balloons along the border, observing, moving troops or preparing to shell. Maybe the *Liberté* passed overhead en route to bombarding the Black Forest factories. But it was further north in the Vosges that the Epinal-based *Pilatre de Rozier* crashed in 1917, killing nine, and bringing to an end the use of balloons along the front line.

This week three rather small helium balloons have been tethered above St Dié. If I say that they have a map of the world on them, will that remind you that this is the time of year when St Dié holds its prestigious *FIG (Festival International de Géographie)*? At least, the mayor is always assuring us that it is prestigious. It's just as well that he wasn't present at one of the lectures, when the speaker announced that he'd flown in from an important Francophone conference in Romania to be present at "*ce petit sous-prefecture*". The mayor would have been mortified. As it was, the audience was rather miffed that the hour-long lecture, prefaced by the question "could you remind me what the title of my talk is?" was delivered high speed (no questions, please) in half an hour so that the speaker could return by plane to the more important debates in Bucharest.

The ambitious title of this year's *FIG* was "*Les géographes redécouvrent les Amériques*". It commemorates the publication 500 years ago in St Dié of the first map of the world to name the landmass on the left as America. Every year

there are invited countries (last year Italy produced an excellent food tent. Another year Morocco was big on tourist information and mint tea). This year the invited “*pays*” were the French American territories of Guadeloupe, Guyana, Martinique, Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon and Clipperton. You can imagine how ignorant we felt, having never heard of the latter. But we felt reassured after looking it up to discover that Clipperton is a barren, ring-shaped coral atoll located 1630 miles south-south east of San Diego, with no inhabitants other than sea birds and land crabs (so what happened to the descendants of the lighthouse keeper and fifteen women who were there in 1917?). The 7,000 inhabitants of Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon are positively prolific in comparison.

Sadly, none of the invited guests had laid on a food tent. But below St Dié's *Tour de Liberté* the Forestry Commission officials had made a rather small and straggling exhibition of plants and trees imported from the Americas, photos of their work in Guyana, a cauldron of very tasty Mexican soup and two tepees. Have I missed something, - is Mexico now French? Or is it just that the foresters don't have a recipe for Guyanese (or Clippertonian) soup? The programme promised “*la brigade équestre en tenue canadienne*” but the mounties (or horses) must have been off having their lunch when I was there. And meanwhile, where was John? He usually enjoys the *FIG* cookery demonstrations, presided over by one of Strasbourg's renowned chefs, Emile Jung. However this year's sessions didn't entice him. They seemed to involve hamburgers, doughnuts, milk-shakes, and a lot of pineapple chunks. He gave them a miss and painted the staircase walls.

As I walked back to the car at the end of the day, after all that cultural exposure to the Americas, two questions drifted across my tired brain. Firstly, why was Marilyn Monroe flaunting herself on the museum wall as one of the fourteen “*personnages de la mémoire croisée Amériques-France*”? (Answers on a post card please). And, as I walked past the bright lights and inviting tables of China Twon (we assume the sign writer made a mistake on one side - the other side says China Town), my second question was “isn't it time we had another meal there?”

We've tried out several new restaurants over summer, some posh but deserted, some trendy and busy, not to mention our local lorry drivers' pull-in, which having closed for renovations has up-market aspirations (apparently chef was worried that we diners from England, home of *le pudding*, might not find his *pudding aux cerises*, made with stale bread, authentic). China Twon was a very last-minute decision the night that Roger and Dorinda returned from their holiday and had nothing in the fridge. We went early - seven o'clock - which turned out to be a good idea, as it's the only restaurant we've seen in the area with queues outside the door at 9 o'clock and tables not being claimed for the whole evening. It might be the magic words “*buffet à volonté*” (doesn't it sound so much more elegant than “eat as much as you like”?). We started with an aperitif of wine and lychee juice to give us courage to embark on the huge array of salads, and hot meat, fish and rice dishes. It wasn't long before we went back for more. I think the prawn dishes were my favourite. And then there were the deserts. So many fruits and a choice of about twelve

sorbets and ice creams like mango or coconut, with little sesame seed delicacies.

However, our firm favourites remain the Frankenbourg and the Blanche Neige restaurants. We have been delighted that so many of you are coming out to celebrate John's birthday. And after much consultation we have settled on the Blanche Neige for the main birthday meal. I'm sure that in October we won't have snow up there, as we did on the day we first visited! The chef there is still hoping to make his reputation. The Michelin man called a week before our last visit. They are all on tenterhooks till January as a star would mean fame and more customers. At present they only open from Thursday evening to Monday evening. So it feels special to have them open just for us on Thursday 26th at lunchtime!

Your hearts may sink to hear that various optional birthday expeditions and quizzes are also being planned. One activity which we hope won't be taking place is staircase construction. We are due to have a staircase up to the attic installed. The local firm can't do it until the week before John's birthday. Given how frequently any building work schedules over-run, does it sound to you like potential birthday disruption and chaos? We may be reduced to holding a stair-building contest on the Friday!

As for other building project progress: the last newsletter (July) concluded with the new garage having walls, roof ridge, purlins, and rafters in place; John had even acquired some nails for tile battens (at the Entre-deux Eaux flea market). At that point we downed tools and went to England for a couple of weeks (returning, incidentally, with a new dining room table and six chairs - there are two more chairs still in Nottingham which wouldn't fit in Bluto). Then it was too hot for outdoor work. Then August was too wet. So it wasn't until Leila arrived at the end of August that the roof tiles were delivered. This meant that our lucky daughter spent a sunny day of her holiday helping John roof the garage (but she did get to sunbathe on the balcony in between). Another holiday treat for her was the trip to choose a loo for the "en suite wash-room" John is installing in one corner of the attic. But at least after a successful purchase we celebrated at the aforementioned other favourite restaurants, the Frankenbourg.

The Frankenbourg is in a small village at the far end of the pretty sounding *Val d'Argent*. The old silver mines can still be visited in summer and by arrangement. But the capital of the former silver mine trade, Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines, had other things on its mind in mid-September when it hosted the 12th European Patchwork Meeting. As ever the old churches, the theatre and the mining museum were draped with colourful quilts from all over the world. And the villages on the road down to the Frankenbourg had exhibitions too. This year one of the most interesting displays was at the Villa Burrus in Sainte-Croix-aux-Mines. But perhaps I was biased. It's not often that one comes across the name of Blackmore in France. But there it was on a panel in the Villa Burrus describing the cheap Depression quilts or "waggas" that a family of women made from offcuts and swatches of suit material from their employer,

Blackmores, tailors of Sydney, and lined with sugar bags from the grocer, and donated to the needy.

Anyway, the silver trail and the wine route are among the many attractions that await you either in 3 weeks time, or when you next visit. And you might encounter the huntsmen in their red hat bands or a hot air balloon, though sadly the geographers and quilters have all dispersed. Anyway, a warm welcome awaits you from the Blackmores of Entre-deux-Eaux! A bientôt!