

## **Fireworks, floods and feathers: life in Entre-deux-Eaux, April – mid-July 2021**

When we opened our front door at 10.10 pm on July 13 (and for those of you unfamiliar with it, our front door is not a grand plastic-panelled affair, but an old barn door of bare planks with gaps, tarted up with a knocker and lock), we could hear the thumping music from the village. We put on warm clothes and stout shoes and headed down the darkening road, through puddles where the stream and drains had overflowed. The 4 metre-wide lane looping up to the Duhaut and Vozelle farmhouses had been turned into a two-way Entre-deux-Eaux by-pass, with official yellow deviation signs, and to emphasize the yellow warnings of a road block 500 metres ahead, vehicles were parked across the road, barricading the village centre. “Not too good for emergency vehicle access”, John remarked. It was the eve of Bastille Day, and the car park and road round the village shop-cum-bar had been taken over by crowded benches and trestles for feasting and games. By this time, the bouncy castle had been deflated to a flat skin across the road ready to be folded away, and people were shuffling towards the edge of the field. It seemed miraculous that the heavy rain had paused at just the right time for a village celebration culminating in fireworks. John set up his tripod by the field, and we watched shadows moving behind their torches, doing last minute checks on the fireworks. And then there was a five minute riot of colour and falling stars as multiple rockets were launched and burst and then abruptly ceased. The figures behind the torches moved up to inspect the launch site close-up and check that all the fireworks were spent, as we muttered, “we might need those emergency vehicles”. Many of us started to drift towards our homes or parked cars, exchanging greetings and answering queries about still being here despite or because of Brexit and Covid. However the music, so presumably celebrations, continued well after midnight, when we turned off our bedside lights.

This was the first village knees-up for a long time. Last year’s fireworks had been cancelled, the oldies had not met for cake-and-champagne for many months, there had been no New Year champagne and nibbles or communal oldies lunch. So despite the damp, cool evening, everyone was making the most of it. With school term ended, the children could stay up late and the summer holidays had a cracking start. The following evening we watched some of neighbouring St Leonard’s fireworks. But by then the rain had returned, so we were glad to be warm and dry indoors, watching at a distance through windows. And what colourful puffballs lit up the sky and cascaded stars.

Like Boris, Macron had been anxious to relax restrictions in time for the electorate to rush lemming-like towards the south and fondly remembered holiday sunshine. However, on the day that the ever-optimistic Boris was expected to announce, despite others’ caution over increasing cases, that masks would not be compulsory, the more prudent Macron was forced by a similar increase and the low uptake of vaccines (including, worryingly, among health care professionals) to announce that vaccination would be compulsory from September for nursing and non-nursing staff, carers and aids, that certificates proving vaccination would be compulsory in bars, restaurants and

on trains from August, and that free PCR tests (which the French were tending to use instead of vaccination) would no longer be free in autumn. The next day there was a mad rush to book vaccination appointments for everyone over 12, though 12-17 year olds have since been exempted from the vaccination pass entrance requirements as it became obvious it would cause problems for parents. Meanwhile we have been waiting for Boris to relax the quarantine restrictions for fully vaccinated Brits abroad returning to the UK. But the government has just announced that, although France will remain on the orange list, quarantine and testing will still apply to the fully vaccinated, to prevent the beta, or South African, variant from being “reseeded” due to concerns over AstraZeneca vaccine efficacy.

The Sainte Marguerite pensioners were feeling more optimistic, and e-mailed start dates for their activities, – not until September because of the sacred two-month holiday period (when they might need to look after grand children). The physical exercise group will all have to arrive fully kitted out (so no changing-room gossip) and with their own mats and to disperse immediately afterwards without lingering indoor chats, and the mental exercise group met to plan their autumn campaign. Helen went along to the planning meeting of the latter, where the first mental exercise was to work out how to get into the meeting room. A passing community policeman solved the problem by blowing on the swipe card, and then it worked! Once inside, half the group of six wore masks and the remaining three did not. Interesting. And why could they sit and chat, but not the gymnasts? An hour and a half was spent catching up on gossip, ten minutes on planning, and a quarter of an hour on word and number exercises similar to Countdown (known here as *Des chiffres et des mots*). Let’s hope the programme does not get cancelled by the predicted post-holiday Covid increase.

On a rare sunny day, we started to think about a short break in an area of France that we don’t know and bought the Michelin guide to Limousin and Berry with the area round Bourges in mind. However, with wet weather, apart from the lucky break on Bastille Eve, the idea of trailing round in the rain has not been so appealing. Near Bourges are the areas that Alain Fournier and George Sand wrote about, so Helen is re-reading *Le Grand Meaulnes*, and is surprised how similar its pre-1914 village school sounds to the Entre-deux-Eaux school in the 1970s/80s, as recalled by the widow of the former school master. George Sand’s *La Mare au Diable* should be delivered shortly. Maybe the weather will improve and it will not be just armchair travel.

Looking back, the wet weather started a day or two after we had set up the watering system, got out the garden swing-seat and teak benches from their winter storage, and taken delivery of a large garden parasol. But at least we have not faced the severe flooding experienced earlier by flatter parts of the Grand Est, like Reims, or the present appalling floods across the border in Germany and Belgium. Our barn has only needed sweeping and drying out once. And after we cleared the drainage channel of mud, removed the bucket in the drain (to catch the mud) which was hindering rapid outflow, and put two rows of bricks in front of the gap at the bottom of the barn doors, we have had no further problems (fingers crossed). The difficulty has been finding a dry time for cutting the verdant grass and uprooting the luxuriant weeds.

And talking of the garden, the rebuilt fruit cage is doing well, with its new netting and weed-reducing ground cover. It is remarkably sturdy. Helen got a tour of next-door's new hen-house when she dropped round to get the details of their netting supplier. Theirs is an extensive, but less rugged, construction with indoor and outdoor areas to keep the hens safe by day as well as night from the marauding foxes, martens and buzzards which exterminated the previous hens. It sounds as if it has been restocked now. Our cage currently has a good crop of blueberries and raspberries. In other shady areas we have had more wild strawberries than ever before. Helen was crouching down picking them one day when a white van drew up, so, still clutching the bowl of tiny berries, she went to collect the Amazon parcel. "Are they for me?" the driver asked cheekily. But when offered some, he was most suspicious of these tiny unknown things, asking where they were from and whether he should wash them. In the vegetable beds, the peas, broad beans and lettuce have all flourished in the rain, the carrots thinnings are tasty, and the squash and courgettes are very leafy.

The fauna has also flourished, with monster snails, fat slugs and slow-worms in the compost heap. Visiting deer (orchard) and a great-spotted woodpecker (balcony bird feeder) are more welcome sights. However, the vole population must be much reduced thanks to the presence of kestrels and their young in our attic window niche high above the vegetable patch. The kestrel saga, which many of you have been following through John's daily photos and videos, began when Helen remarked idly on the quantity of polystyrene fragments floating down from above the farmhouse front door (this one a proper, panelled but peeling blue-painted wooden door). John went up to the attic and opened the low door through to the storage end, and discovered a round hole in the sheet of polystyrene blocking the small window opening (against messy owls, stone martens and from when the outside walls were sprayed in *crépi*). And four brown speckled eggs lay on the deep window recess. He researched and observed and decided it was a kestrel nest (well, hardly a nest as there was no straw or twigs, but just the bare ledge and bits of pecked polystyrene). He installed a camera linked to his computer (details below on the website), which he modified and tweaked, and is obtaining fascinating pictures.

It seemed a long wait before any sign of cracking or hatching and John fretted that they were getting too cold when the mother flew off for quite long periods. However on the twenty-fifth day of recording, July 9, his patience (and anxiety) was rewarded with the appearance of two baby chicks, one of whom was quite perky for a newborn, while the other seemed increasingly limp. Since July 2 we had not seen the male, who had previously visited occasionally and briefly, so hunger drove the female to leave the newborn chicks in the late afternoon in search of voles or lizards. When she returned we could see her prodding and shaking the inert body of her second hatched. Eventually she gave up and very practically began to consume it and feed bits (probably regurgitated) to her vociferous first born. The next day, July 10, the remaining two chicks hatched.

On the eve of Bastille, there was an excited yell from the attic as John had seen the male delivering a dead vole on the live video feed on his computer screen. Where had the cock been for the previous eleven days? Did they have a store-cupboard nearby that he had been stocking? There was an acrimonious incident with loud recriminations when he was about to take away his dead vole offering, as the female was still feeding another corpse to her fluffy white offspring. John has toyed with the idea of inserting a wooden ridge across the front of the sill to prevent the balls of fluff from rolling or hopping off before they can fly, but decided it was cause too much alarm. You can see all the pictures and videos at <https://www.blackmores-online.info/Kestrel/>. During this time our TV screen has been showing an interesting mix of the live kestrel video feed (Chromecast), Wimbledon matches, European cup football and catch-up crime series (Line of Duty and Fargo).

Helen also watched quite a few matches from the French Open Tennis. Most games were played in front of very small audiences, but in the last week, more people were allowed to watch. However there was still an 11pm curfew. So there had to be a 10.30pm break to allow spectators to leave without disturbing players. But they got very involved in the exciting semi-final match between Nadal and Djokovic, and it seemed most unlikely that they would leave willingly. At the last minute, the French PM who was watching on TV phoned through permission for the spectators to stay on without incurring curfew penalties. Riots avoided! But how annoying for those with longer journeys who had left a bit earlier.

In case you are wondering if we still have books piled on the floor, following the problems with the underfloor heating that we mentioned in the last newsletter, the shelves are back in position and the books returned to them. It turned out the expansion chamber the plumber had replaced wasn't working. It is a cylinder with rubber across the middle. The top fills with water and pushes the rubber down into the other half as it expands. The plumber had assumed the new cylinder was OK and thought there must be a leak in the underfloor pipe rather than a problem with his handiwork. The leak only required about 150ml of water to top up the system each day. John eventually noticed a drop from a valve at the back of the boiler. The drip, from the increased pressure, was slow enough that the water had evaporated so not been noticed. The plumber finally agreed the cylinder rubber must have had a hole, so all the cylinder had filled and there was no pressure relief (the same problem as the old chamber), so he replaced the replacement expansion chamber.

In fact there are more books on the shelves now as John and his sister between them ordered all the books on Helen's Amazon list for her birthday. But buying anything from the UK since Brexit can be a problem as there are often import duties and additional customs clearance charges. (Amazon UK ensures all those charges are paid on ordering if the goods are those Amazon fulfils, but not necessarily those from the Marketplace.) There can also be problems with parcels disappearing after they reach France. Two of the book parcels went missing as well as some Vanish soap, which is not available in France. Being Amazon, refunds weren't a problem and replacements arrived safely. Interestingly, John ordered a newly-published UK book from Amazon

FR and, although the tracking showed it was sent from the UK, it was cheaper than a copy from Amazon UK delivered to a UK address would have been, despite the usual UK book discounts and the price maintenance on books in France. He also discovered that he could buy more Yorkshire tea from Amazon FR and 100% pomegranate juice from Amazon DE.

The pomegranate juice was an essential ingredient for John to cook Chicken Ottolenghi, a particular favourite, for Helen's birthday dinner. It is one of the things we usually buy on visits to the UK. Only later did we discover just a couple of bottles in amongst all the 30% bottles in the Turkish shop in Saint Dié opposite the garden centre (where we had been looking for non-leaky Wellington boots for John). Before John started to prepare the chicken dish, the sun came out and we had a very pleasant walk along a shady forest track on part of the Kemberg *massif* we had not walked before. We followed an intriguing sign to *Le sapin qui pisse*. This turned out to be a fountain, which at an earlier date must have emerged for a pine tree that has since disappeared. They seem to have been popular forest features, and research revealed there is a better one near Raon l'Etape, which might make another interesting walk. After that, the chicken with its pomegranate juice flavouring was delicious, as was the coffee birthday cake indulgence.

We had continued with our Saturday evening set-menu dinners deliveries from *l'Imprimerie*, although most of the courses were less interesting, though larger, than those of his surprise menus at the restaurant. So we were pleased when restaurants were allowed to re-open in June and celebrated with lunch at *l'Imprimerie* on their first day, and enjoyed the more adventurous surprises, like the mushroom chawanmushi. They were hoping that in the evening they would get everyone served, replete and out before the 11 o'clock curfew, a pressure to which they were unaccustomed. The evening curfew ended on June 20, which was probably a relief for all restaurants. As well as worrying about the evening constraints, the waiter was having difficulty telling us about the wine, as he could not read the label on the back of the bottle; he confided that he now has glasses for reading but they steam up when he's wearing his detested mask (an only too familiar problem!) so he's not wearing them (glasses, not masks) at work. We, however, wallowed in the feeling of normal life, despite the masks.

Restaurants were only allowed to reopen at 50% capacity, with compulsory masks when not seated and no more than 6 at a table, so we were surprised that all the tables were in use at *l'Imprimerie*. However they are very well spaced, and it would previously have been possible to fit more tables in than they have. (They can only seat about 24 at the moment). A party of seven had obediently been accommodated on two well-distanced tables (though this meant there was noisy shouting between tables).

However, the 50% capacity rule was observed at *Chez Guth*, where we went the following week, taking a long detour as the usual road was closed (more yellow diversion signs). On arrival at the hillside chalet restaurant, we received a very warm welcome. They pride themselves on their foraged and seasonal ingredients, so were disconcerted (not to mention initially disbelieving) when John commented that it was still their old October menu

on their website. So Madame checked and rang their website contact to complain bitterly as we chatted to chef at the end. And the following week we ate at Toby's favourite, the *Frankenbourg*, and toasted absent family and friends with whom we have enjoyed meals there over many years. The wine waiter/sommelier, who seemed a mere slip of a lad when we first went well over 20 years ago, has, like other male staff, got a little portly during lockdown, but the three wines he selected to accompany the meal were excellent (and he knows all about the wines, so has no problems trying to read labels!). Helen particularly liked the raspberry and pistachio dessert.

We enjoyed the drives almost as much as the meals, after having been restricted for so long in how far we could drive without a permitted reason. Before the *deconfinement*, the only longer drive had been to Epinal at the end of April to complete our post-Brexit residence permit applications at the Departmental Prefecture, which we decided was permitted as "administrative summons". As we had produced all the required documentation for our previous permits, this trip merely involved queueing outside the Prefecture until being escorted to the relevant desks by a masked man with a list of appointments. There it was only a matter of handing over 2 recent photos and having fingerprints taken. It was a shame that no bars or coffee shops were open afterwards, but at least the Prefecture loos were available, before we drove back to wait a month or so for our permits to be posted. And we now have our new cards.

Some of you may remember they finally put a fibre internet connection into the village in 2018. But we are still over 700m from that junction box and still connected by copper wire. It allowed our internet connection speed to go from 2Mbps download to 18Mbps but upload still remained less than 1Mbps. In May John did some checking and discovered other internet providers were offering higher speeds so decided to switch. We now have a modern Livebox modem to replace the eight-year old modem and a 38/10Mbps connection, at a lower monthly cost. And, hopefully, in a couple of years we'll have fibre to the house.

As we thus idle away the hours in Entre-deux-Eaux, the UK family news has been mixed. The Covid that Leila caught back in March has been acknowledged, after much physical fatigue and brain fog, to be long Covid, and in August she will have a telephone assessment by a nurse from the long Covid clinic. Occupational Health have suggested reducing her working hours further, possibly until Christmas, but at present there do not seem to be arrangements in place for the City Council to continue to pay full salaries to long Covid sufferers working fewer hours, which is a worry. But she has been trying to see friends and stay in touch with everyone despite the fatigue.

Toby, Rachel and Farrah recovered better from their bouts of Covid, and Toby is working on a new contract with Pret, which sounds very demanding. They had booked an August holiday in the south of France, so will be disappointed with the announced quarantine for travellers from France and may have to cancel.

However Leila was able to spend a weekend with them last month, collecting Jacob from Stella en route (and returning him on Sunday). She slept at our house. John's sister, Ann, husband Derek, sons Steven and David along with Steven's wife and their two young sons were all able to drive up to Letchworth that Saturday, and despite the cool weather enjoyed a great day together, with lots of hide and seek, gossip, games and feasting. We were sad to miss this family gathering, as it is such a long time since we saw everyone. But, as we read news of family and friends who have been so ill during this period, we really can't grumble.

So we really hope it will not be too long before we are all able to meet up again. *A bientôt!*