

Sullen skies over Entre-deux-Eaux, December 2021 to mid-March 2022

On Tuesday 15th March the sky turned a lowering shade of dirty yellow, and the car windscreen wipers had to work hard to clear the windscreen of large sandy splodges. Car wash facilities later did a good trade. Saharan sand was blowing north on the Sirocco as it did in February 2021. The skies have not, of course, been leaden throughout winter here but there have been a lot of dull grey days. So occasional days of sun and recent spring flowers have felt glorious.

Hard on the heels of our December newsletter, the new Omicron strain of Covid caused the re-introduction of travel restrictions and uncertainty over ease of re-entry to France. We were touched by the sympathetic and supportive response of family and friends to our reluctant decision to remain in Entre-deux-Eaux over Christmas despite having booked our Eurotunnel ticket. The post office in Saulcy-sur-Meurthe was the main beneficiary as we bought up all the stamps for European destinations they had in stock for our Christmas cards. For once we were glad that UK shops stock up with Christmas food unseasonably early, as we had bought some mince pies in October (some for Helen's Brain Teaser group), so consoled ourselves with coffee and the last mince pies the group had not eaten.

Our thoughts then turned to long distance Amazon Christmas present orders, Christmas decorations for here rather than there, and finally French Christmas fare. We didn't find any holly in the orchard or forest, so picked the deep pink spindle, white honesty, aromatic sage, rosemary and lavender from the garden, added pine cones and branches from the forest, and later found clusters of low-hanging mistletoe outside the book village, to arrange round the candles, plaster Peruvian angels and kings, and in a wreath on the door.

A few days before Christmas we raided our classy local freezer shop, Thiriet, for some treats over Christmas and New Year. From the entrée section we selected some prawn pastillas, guinea fowl and foie gras pastillas, and scallop and salmon parcels. Crispy prawns and prawn nems came from the exotic Chinese-cum-Thai cabinet, and from the dessert section we chose a box of creamy Paris-Brest and some Arabica coffee, chocolate and whisky confections. We already had a guinea fowl stuffed with foie gras in the freezer, carrots, parsnips, curly kale, and Jerusalem artichokes (delicious mashed with garlic) from the garden, and some favourite wines in the "cellar" - better known as the barn. At the Belgian supermarket we had found Brussels sprouts, actually labelled from Brussels. And to round off, we had some boxes of chocolate and John's Christmas cake that we would no longer taking to England. So we were all set for several days, if not weeks of feasting, especially with the addition of our pickles to the left-overs (we were glad to find an old jar of pickled walnuts on a shelf in the barn, a delicacy that we have never seen in shops here).

Before we opened it on Christmas Day, we thought that the light (so not books) box that had arrived from Ann and Derek might contain crackers, but were delighted to find hours of entertainment in the form of a thousand piece jigsaw puzzle of Dickens' London. So, despite the dull, damp and rather nasty weather, we had bright lights indoors, a fridgeful of food, and books, crosswords, football on TV and the puzzle to allay the sadness of not being with the family.

At the start of January we saw two of our neighbours who were out walking after an exhausting festive period with all their family visiting - between them they had ten grandchildren and their parents to entertain. They confirmed that the mayor's annual New Year greetings (a speech followed by champagne and nibbles) had been cancelled due to the alarming rise in Covid cases. The January and February club reunions, including the popular January lunch, of village oldies had also been cancelled, as had all group gatherings for *galette des rois* and champagne. And the lunch offered by the mayor and council for the village oldies was, like last year's, delivered to our door. The festive lights and merry decorations around the village seemed to get taken down earlier than usual, well before Candlemas.

As the French hospitals filled up with Covid cases (85% of whom were unvaccinated) there were protests in the larger towns over Macron's remarks about making life difficult for people who were refusing vaccinations. At the same time we were hearing about Downing Street parties (or work meetings), Djokovic's attempts to circumvent Australian policies to play in the Australian Open, and Boris' plans to relax restrictions over mask wearing, working from home, self-isolation and border tests.

Leila and her friends had decided before Christmas that their plan to take a winter break in Berlin might be better changed to the Lake District. But soon after their arrival at the rented house, she wrote that on the day before they had a booking for Sunday lunch at *l'Enclume* (promoted from two to three Michelin stars a few weeks later) she was feeling very coldy and had tested positive for Covid. As she had only just started to feel better after long Covid, we were concerned, but it does not seem to have lingered for too long. John got pinged by his Covid app here to say that he had been in contact with someone with Covid, but decided it was probably someone at the far end of a supermarket as nothing developed. But it did mean we delayed plans for a restaurant meal. France did not start to relax restrictions until 14th March. The next day we heard that both the mayor and his deputy have Covid.

As we continued to hear of difficulties in the UK over getting face-to-face GP appointments, we were glad to report that here consultations remained possible. But we were affronted to discover, when we rang for routine check-ups, that our much appreciated GP had retired a week or two earlier without our knowing. Apparently he'd started telling patients in October of his departure but we'd not seen him since August.

With twenty minute appointments (which usually ended up being much longer) we had always chatted about language and travels when we'd dealt with health issues, and his health advice, including negotiating the French system, was thoughtful too. Although we knew that he and his partner who had set up the practice together, were looking around for eventual replacements, and were reducing their hours, we didn't expect it to happen just yet. He looked far too young and fit to go now. But it seems that the forthcoming birth of twin grandchildren in the south of France had influenced his timing. So we saw a new, young, fast-talking colleague, who assessed our records and made all the necessary on screen changes for him to become our *médecin traitant*. We just hope he slows down a bit in his speech. We did, however, still have the luxury of twenty minute consultations - and he was not running horribly late (we always used to take a good book for the long waits before our appointments).

The next day John was able to get an emergency dental appointment for a painful tooth and was chastened by the stern rebuke he got for his long absence. Thinking she had better make an appointment with her dentist in the same group practice, Helen discovered that he, like our doctor, had decided it was time to retire, and was fully booked until his last day. She was given a date four months ahead with his successor. For some reason one expects these pillars of the community to be around for ever. Even the priest, Pere Eric, who served Entre-deux-Eaux (on rotation among many other local villages) and took Madame Laine's funeral, has gone back to Burkina Faso.

Talking of Madame Laine, I wonder what happened to all of her husband Pierre's hunting trophies after their daughter modernised and moved into her parent's house? The heads hung all round the dining room walls, the largest being a stag. Who now goes after the local boars, as Pierre and his pals regularly did? Many of the older village hunters have gone. But somebody must. When we discussed, with our neighbours, the main dish delivered by the commune as part of the Christmas lunch to our doorstep (along with 2 half bottles of wine each, nibbles, starter, cheese and dessert) we decided the unlabelled meat was probably boar.

We have not seen any of the local deer this winter. Before Christmas John was forced to line a gap under the eaves with bricks as a green woodpecker was busy drilling through the wooden boarding into the attic. Was it the same woodpecker who had bored so many holes into the telegraph pole opposite that ENEDIS had to replace it and another recently?

Our last resident in the attic, apart from mice, had been the stone marten several years ago. We recalled it when Jessica talked on the phone about the hole in the wooden shingle roof of her house in Broadstairs and John suggested it could be caused by a marten rather than squirrel. There were some local Kent newspaper reports from earlier in the summer of a marten being spotted. The local pest control were puzzled by the unusual scat that they found. It turned out that a couple of pine martens had indeed escaped from the Wildwood Trust outside Canterbury. The Wildwood Trust seemingly

have plans to reintroduce them into Kent. Have the residents been told of the damage martens can do, including killing chickens and gnawing car electrical wiring (which is a significant problem in Germany?) Despite the damage they cause they are a protected species both here and there. Nevertheless, here the local farmers are known to shoot them.

But let it not be thought that we are heartless about wildlife. One morning in February we saw a slinky white ermine sniffing round near one of our old woodpiles, although we have not seen one since or in the previous twenty years (and unfortunately did not have enough time to photograph it).

A couple of weeks ago we went to Colmar to purchase a small window which John fixed on the wall in the attic in front of the opening where the kestrels nested last year. In the hope that they might return this year, he put in a wood base with a special sill with a ledge to prevent eggs and chicks from rolling (or being pushed) off. To complete the welcome he added some woodchips and sawdust. So we hope they will be tempted. Some have already returned to established sites in Alsace and further north in the Vosges.

As we crossed the col de Bonhomme to pick up the window, John noticed that a lorry with a Lithuanian registration plate also had a notice saying "*I am not going to England*" (presumably to discourage stowaways?) On a less sad note than the lorry, as Helen's brain-exercise group were deploring the Ukrainian situation, Martine added that her 39-year old son, who works in Germany, had for the first time brought a girlfriend home with him on a visit. He had not mentioned that she is a Ukrainian who has also been working in Germany. There was a panic as Martine wondered *a)* what food to cook for her and *b)* what language they could use to communicate with a girl who spoke German and Ukrainian (which they do not) but not French. They had to resort to rusty English. And the tagine was appreciated.

On the way to purchase the window, we stopped in Lapoutroie, a village on the other side of the Col for lunch at a hotel where we had not eaten for many years, - since 2005, in fact. Outside were large centenary exhibition photographs of scenes from the First World War, when Lapoutroie was German. Inside they still adhered to a sort of class system which separates those eating the cheaper menu of the day from those eating fancier fare. We had forgotten quite how much cream could be piled on Alsace desserts, but prudently asked for black coffees afterwards.

Other small items of news from here, are that we now have a new, larger garage door after the old one was rammed (possibly by an anonymous trailer) before Christmas. We have not yet replaced the smashed flower tubs, but the vegetable patches are covered in a layer of the cow dung we acquired as compensation from the farmer.

We should finally get a full fibre internet connection before summer (rather than copper cable from the box in the village), courtesy of a Grand Est-owned company which is cabling the villages, as they have been hanging fibre cable

from the poles. Orange (France Telecom) has stopped supplying PSTN telephone lines. They will decommission all their copper cabling and their posts between 2026 and 2030. The new companies installing fibre cable have to install new posts where necessary. Ducting doesn't seem to be affected. We spent a happy hour or two last week just standing on the doorstep watching two young men running a long length of fibre cable from the last electricity/telegraph pole (the new one opposite our front door) through a tube under the road to a manhole outside our garage, where it took a right angle and was edged into another underground pipe and drawn 100m through to the three houses at the end of our road.

The last bit of good news is that the sun has come out this week, and in addition the snowdrops and hellebores we are enjoying the daffodils and cowslips in the orchard. With the clearer skies at night this month and the moon rising in the early evening, John has also been taking photos of the waxing crescent to full moon phases. Long may the good weather last!