

## Churches, Cistercians and burnt-out cars: everyday life in Entre-deux-Eaux, August - December 2023

The second part of 2023 here could be summarised briefly as August, absent in Letchworth; September, hot, health appointments and short holiday; October, restaurants and rain; November, rain, decluttering; December, Christmas thoughts.

It was good to spend time with Leila and with Toby and his family while we were over in August. Jacob is growing up fast, and he and Stella moved house over summer, but fortunately they are still near his school. While Leila was with us we took Jacob and Farrah to a water park which they enjoyed in the hot weather. On our way back to E2E we had a lovely day with Ann and Derek in Folkestone, wandering along the clifftop and round the harbour, before a belated birthday lunch at a small restaurant in the old town, then afternoon tea in Dymchurch with Helen's former London flat-mate.

We returned to a series of appointments in September, Helen to what John calls eye-wagging (exercises with the orthoptist) and dermatology and John to very helpful appointments with an audiologist with a particular interest in tinnitus; John can now hear so much better with his new hearing aids. On a Sunday between appointments we took advantage of sites being open for *Patrimoine* or Heritage Day and drove over to Plainfaing to see the wall paintings in the Town Hall (which weren't as interesting as they sounded), and started reminiscing about restaurants we used to go to in our early days here. We drove up the narrow lane to the ferme-auberge which was still on the hillside above, with a coach outside which seemed to be connected to a volleyball team, though the group sitting at the outdoor tables looked a bit past their sporting prime.

In a back street we stopped to see the recent wall painting on the end of the school (which was where Ghislaine, who comes regularly for English conversation, taught for many years), then looked in the church, which had an interesting wall painting above the war memorial showing local WW1 trench warfare (we haven't seen that before in a church). The huge old factory has also been restored and is full of sale goods for the Emmaus homeless charity. Then, alas, on our way home, the front tyre of Bluto caught on a sharp curb of a new chicane and it seemed an awfully long hot walk home to get one of the summer tyres from the farmhouse. We were so glad of two cars so we could drive back in Snowy, and John changed the wheel quickly.

Realising that, due to a postponed appointment, we had a week at the end of September without appointments, we rapidly booked a gîte in part of France we could easily reach in a day, threw together some clothes, tea bags and guide books, and set off in Snowy for Avallon in the Burgundy/Franche-Comté region. It proved to be a most enjoyable break (certainly better than the over-hyped "Romantic Rhine" at the end of June). The weather was sunny but not too hot, the gîte comfortable, and the churches beautiful.

We unpacked at our gîte (Saint-Père) which extended across the upper floor of an old town house in a narrow street (rue Maison Dieu) by the market square (it was well we had no heavy luggage as we had to climb a flight of steep outside steps, avoiding a somnolent cat, to reach the front door). Then we walked down to the picturesque *Tour d'Horloge*, collected leaflets and an up-to-date parking disc from the Avallon Tourist Office, and looked round the 12C Saint Lazare church. Although the small town looked fairly prosperous, its Romanesque church was woefully neglected, with damaged portals, chapel frescoes almost indecipherable with damp, and woodwork long deprived of polish. Was the boat propped in a side chapel, part of a saint's attributes or just dumped? Old buildings along the ramparts, on the other hand, had been carefully restored.

World Heritage Vezelay's Romanesque/Gothic Sainte Marie-Madeleine next day, when we finally reached to top of the hill, was a lovely contrast, as the light and airy basilica had been carefully restored by Viollet-le-Duc, with spectacular archway carvings and detailed column capitals. We saw it first from the road, rising dramatically above the vineyards. It took a while to reach it as we strolled up the pilgrim road of the tiny town looking in tourist boutiques and courtyards, and paused for coffee, quiche and hazelnut tart. We weren't there in the main tourist season so the town was relatively quiet. Afterwards, having spent time inside the basilica we followed a footpath down to La Cordelle, the tiny Franciscan chapel. We returned another day to look round the former house of novelist Romain Rolland, now a small museum, with artworks by Leger, Miro, Kandinsky and Picasso.

The village churches were also interesting with the angels blowing their trumpets at the corners of Saint Père's church tower and the frescoes of Vault-de-Lugny. In the small town of Saulieu, we admired the droll capitals of the twelfth century basilica (though thought its blue and gold organ looked like a fairground one), then looked round an adjacent house containing sculptures of Pompon, whose famous polar bear was featured on the brass arrows pointing from the car park to the museum. We particularly liked a running rabbit, a pelican and a rampant boar and Helen couldn't resist buying a red coffee mug featuring the polar bear which is a daily reminder of that handful of sunlit September days in Burgundy.

We had a shock on our return to Entre-deux-Eaux, and still have a daily reminder of that too. We had set out early on that last day, taking a cross-country route to the Cistercian Abbey of Fontenay. Founded in 1118, over 200 monks had followed the rule of St Benedict, though it declined in the sixteenth century when the King rather than the monks appointed the abbots. After the Revolution it was, like so many ecclesiastical buildings, sold as state property, and later bought by Elie de Montgolfier, who transformed the huge building in which the monks had an iron forge into a paper-mill. A son-in-law bought it in 1906 and started a massive renovation, demolishing all the paper mill buildings. Now the simplicity of the lofty church, cloisters, huge communal dormitory and work areas are silent again, though the water harnessed by the restored forge can be heard. Another coach-free World Heritage site.

And the shock? On Friday, as we drove up our road, we saw two burnt out cars outside our neighbour Ludo's small repair garage. Behind them a burnt concrete electricity pole still stood, but its recently installed fibre cables were lying, severed, on the ground. So the 9 houses further up the road, including ours, were without phone, internet or TV and the farmer could not use the internet-controlled automatic milking equipment. As we stared, horrified, Ludo's father returned from SFR, our mutual phone and internet service provider, clutching a temporary SFR box which allows internet access through the mobile phone network, and told us how to get one. The next few days were occupied with phone calls, visits, and sorting out the temporary box. The cables were mended and rehung more quickly than expected on the following Monday. It seems to have been a deliberate fire which the police are investigating. But, as far as we know, the arsonist and their motive have not been discovered and the blackened car carcasses are still outside Ludo's garage.

One unplanned side effect was that when we went into Saint Dié to the SFR shop, we also wandered round the Geography Festival, which we hadn't hitherto been too bothered about this year. With the departure of the former mayor, it is now a smaller event, with fewer sessions of interest, but that day the cafes were busy in the sunshine, extra tables were being laid for lunch outside restaurants, and a small band was strolling down the main street. The book tent had as large and busy a display as ever, which inspired us afterwards to look round the newly-opened multimedia library building.

The next morning while we were still in our dressing gowns (possibly as late as 10.30), the doorbell unexpectedly rang. Our surprise callers were an English-speaking man (of N. Irish and Welsh descent) and two of his French friends. He has just moved from Colmar into a house on the other side of the village, and they had all been down to the village bar ("very friendly locals!") and been told about the English couple in the house with the blue shutters. So we invited them in for a chat. He later brought round some home-made cake and flyers for a photography exhibition in Sainte-Marie-aux-Mines where he was exhibiting, so we went over to see it.

On the way back from Sainte-Marie, we noticed that a village restaurant in Wisembach, which had been closed for several years, had re-opened. As we were now into autumnal rain, when our main diversion becomes weekly restaurant sorties, we tried out the *Blanc Ru* one very wet day. When we phoned to book, we were lucky to get the last table as its very reasonable menu of the day attracted workers from the local factory as well as the usual retired people. It felt like a family enterprise, with mother in the kitchen, a bustling daughter taking orders and serving, a son behind one bar and towards the end another son appeared. The thirteen euro menu was chalked on a slate on the gatepost: a hearty starter of winegrower's salad, main of chicken and chips, and stewed damsons with ice-cream for dessert. With the rising prices of everything, our favourite *Imprimerie* restaurant is cutting back; it now only serves a menu-of-the-day on weekdays (and neither of the

more extensive menus we used to choose) and a single surprise menu at the weekend, while one waiter, Guillaume who joined last year has returned to his old occupation of nursing and its better pay, and the shy co-chef is (reluctantly, it seems) serving at table. One Saturday we tried a menu-of-the-day at the *Bouche à Oreille* in Raon l'Etape (they too were full and turning away customers).

But we went up-market for John's birthday at a starred restaurant in Wihr au Val in Alsace, only to find at the end of the meal when we came out, that Snowy wouldn't start - the ten year-old battery had finally died! No garage in the village, so we had to phone our insurers (French car insurance includes breakdown cover), who organised a mechanic to get us started. He turned up twenty minutes later from a nearby town, used a booster pack to start Snowy, and gave us a stern warning as we set off - "don't stop the engine till you get home". We didn't, and a new battery is now in place!

In November we started decluttering, but got diverted by some of the things we came across! Among them were Helen's handwritten account of our second Indian journey (1986) which she has been typing up. That made us realise John hadn't finished scanning all the slides in 2011. So John's Indian slides have now been added to his computer. Lots of lovely memories as the rain continued outside.

The young man who has been helping this year with heavier garden tasks recovered from his latest illness/injury and came with his taciturn father to do a lot of tree pruning and cutting back of bramble and wild rose thickets, which was very useful. We rescued lots of the hips to decorate the house and make a Christmas wreath for the door.

At the end of the month we tried a new-to-us starred restaurant in Barr, over in Alsace. As the streets and shops of Barr are very festive in mid-December for their Christmas Market, it was a disappointment to find most shops closed apart from barbers, hairdressers and bakeries. The only festive things were the *Mannele* in the bakeries - the spiced brioches in the shape of little men which are offered at St Nicolas (6 December). But the *Enfin restaurant* was bright and bustling; we thoroughly enjoyed their seasonal menu and wines and will return in the New Year.

We had cold days and our first snow of the year at the beginning of December, very light, but enough to add a festive touch without becoming a nuisance. St Nicolas has now visited the children; the mulled wine, mice in white outfits (tree decorations), wood turned and ceramic artefacts have appeared at the Christmas market in the nearby village of Sainte Marguerite; our ceramic angels are on the windowsill; and our aromatic wreath of sage, lavender and bay leaves, scarlet hips, ribbons and silver baubles is on the front door.

Christmas greetings to everyone from Entre-deux-Eaux!