



Strauss Annual Report & Travelogue 2011 ***vol 3, no 13***

Another year, another story, or rather another collection of stories, as there are always so many things to recall at the end of a year. As usual, we have been travelling here and there, mostly on our cycles, but our time at home has been spread across the myriad of involvements that keep us from staying in bed all day.

The cold winter we were experiencing as we wrote our 2010 letter continued into the new year, bringing even lower temperatures (-10C/14F) than in December. The snow seemed to take forever to melt, but a window of mild temperatures mid-January made the roads clear enough to start the first project of 2011. We don't usually venture out on our bikes before March, but Pat needed to get a new one, her 23-year old tourer having sustained a fatal tube fracture at the end of our New England tour. Three friends' bikes were lined up for test riding, to assess size and handling issues. Luckily, the owner of the one that felt 'right' offered to sell it, precluding a prolonged consideration of too many other options, and a lovely 'Ruby Flamboyant' Mercian found a new home in our cellar. (For readers who care about such things, the frame was one of 50 made specially to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the York Rally.)



The warmth of our computers and printers working flat out on our never-ending lists of short-term projects and ongoing work is somewhat comforting in winter, but there's nothing like a Dame, and making sure 'she' and the rest of the cast in our theatre's Panto (Snow White and the Seven Woodsmen) were well-lit kept Pat busy (and warm!) for all of January. It was her first time being responsible for 'designing' the lighting and putting together a team to set and run it, but the show was a great success.

Sadly two phone calls came through at the end of January announcing the deaths of both Pat's mother and Mike's 'step-father' (his mother's second husband, late in life). Neither were great surprises, but both turned our annual trip to LA in February into a very different visit, with the inevitable sorting out of papers and personal belongings taking up all of our time, leaving none for the usual get-togethers with friends, though it did give us a good visit with Pat's sister and brother and Mike's 'step-brother'. Luckily, by the time we left, we had found a very hard-working sales agent for the house and a possible tenant for our condo, relieving us of the need for a second visit later in the spring. Once home, Mike was able to continue working on the financial side of his step-father's affairs from the comfort of his own desk, while Pat divided her time between the theatre, the camera club, the Come Cycling project and the local history group.



March was a much more positive month. Early on we enjoyed our first significant 'outing' of the year, a week at Dufton in Cumbria, staying at the youth hostel with the group we took to New England in 2010. One of the couples who lived in the village led us on rides each day through the stunning though rugged landscape. In the evenings, after a very good meal, we chatted by the fireside and looked at each other's photos until we dozed off.





Spring was just breaking through that far north, giving lovely displays of crocus and snowdrops, and the sheep seemed to be enjoying the sunshine, though we remained well bundled up! The annual CTC tour leaders' meeting a week later, held in Derbyshire, revolved around the usual sharing of stories and solutions to little challenges that arise from time to time. Our contribution was a presentation on how some of the less well known features of Google maps can help with planning tours. The only cycling we did up there was between the venue and Derby rail station, though we did work in a nice ride home from Cheltenham. On the final weekend of the month, on a lovely sunny day, we spent our 34th wedding anniversary pedaling around our local daffodil fields and supporting a village tea. We had done the same two years ago after Pat's father died, so treated this occasion as a tribute to her mum.

By April life was warming up. Mike's was still tied to his computer, crunching numbers and filling out forms, while Pat and a colleague launched a new High Street project, with the intent that a small team of volunteers will research the past uses and tenants of each of the shops along the road, hopefully producing a small publication at some point in the future. She and some other local photographers mounted their second exhibition at a gallery in Ledbury, and again she sold a print!

Two weekends got us away on the bikes – the first one in Wiltshire for the triennial White Horse Weekend, from which we cycled all the way home (105km!), followed by Easter down on the Sussex coast with the Tandem Club. It had been a long time since we visited that part of the world, and we had forgotten how different (and attractive) the buildings and the



countryside are. Cycling by the seafront and along river estuaries in shorts and short sleeved tops is normally unthinkable at that time of year, but we gladly made the most of the glorious, record-breaking warm weather and revelled in the beautiful displays of bluebells and other displays of spring flowers it brought.



Local activity kept us well occupied during most of May until we headed off to France for our annual cycle camping tour. This year's itinerary involved riding from Bordeaux down to the Pyrénées then east along their foothills to the Mediterranean, a 3½ week journey (3 nights at each campsite) through what was mostly new territory to us. The first stretch, through the flat area of Les Landes, was unremarkable except for the 'wild-west' theme campsite we used on

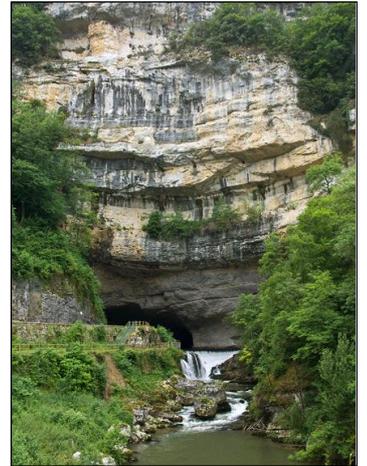


our first nights, the zillions of trees we cycled past and a delightful little church dedicated to cyclists, its walls lined with famous racers' jerseys and other memorabilia.





Moving south to the mountains, we were rewarded with only a couple of impressive views of them, due to mediocre weather. However things improved as we moved east, with cameras being pulled out to shoot everything from distant views to doorways. The 500m long cave at Le Mas-d'Azil was certainly one of the highlights, if a bit unsettling cycling through it! The vibrant town of Mirepoix, with its colourful central square humming with locals and tourists browsing an antiques market, was particularly attractive. Lourdes offered a rather different view of the world, with hundreds, maybe thousands, of invalids being pushed from one spot of hope to the next, and dozens of tourist shops brimming with candles, rosaries, statues and holy water. We were glad we had visited Carcassonne 20-some years ago, when its medieval fortress atmosphere was less dominated by tourists and shops all selling the same tat. Cycling along the Canal du Midi offered a much more peaceful alternative!



A personal high point of the tour was seeing an old friend who moved to France many years ago. Through annual letters we had read of the trials and tribulations of her purchasing an old falling-down house/barn outside a village east of Tarbes and renovating it to a liveable state. Finally we were able to see this rural idyll for ourselves! Very sadly, though, we also hit a seriously low point. Two tour members cycling to meet us at our third campsite were hit by a car; Lesley, whose sister was already with us, tragically didn't survive the impact. Dealing with things then, and later, was a heartbreaking and difficult experience we earnestly hope never to have to repeat.



The Ledbury Poetry Festival, always the highlight of July, did its best to revive our spirits. Listening to carefully put together words day after day for a week can help one think and sort out feelings. We were lucky with our house guests this year, enjoying the banter of the Irish poet, Matt Sweeney, over a couple of bottles of wine, and the more contemplative personality of Jo Shapcott over a couple of brandies. Pat worked hard to stretch her tourist French to communicate with another poet we hosted, a Tunisian who makes his home in Paris, until the last day of his stay when he suddenly graced us with his nearly fluent English! Making nearly a thousand badges for two large cycling events, designing and making a new rain fly/enclosed porch for our tent and entertaining visitors also kept us busy.





Time just for **us** can be hard to come by, so we made the most of a three week stretch of it August. Having had such a super time at the Semaine Fédérale (the annual French celebration of cycling) the previous year, we eagerly booked for the event again. With a friend, we cycled south from the Normandy coast to the town of Flers where the rally was based. Although the event drew some 13,000 like-minded souls, we never encountered mass crowds, just enough to create a magical atmosphere of lots and lots of happy cyclists of all shapes, sizes and ages. The camping field, being well colonized by other friends from the UK, added greatly to the sociable side of things. We had to endure three consecutive days of rain (our new tent fly/extension worked a treat!), but that was more than made up for by eight dry days riding in mostly gently rolling countryside.



Sightseeing was fairly minimal, though we spent a long time wandering around the lovely half-timbered town of Domfront, and there were a few curiosities along the way to take photos of. One of the real treats of the event is the dozens and dozens of imaginatively decorated bicycles and other 'bicycle art' put out by the locals to support and amuse us. Another is the Sunday Parade, when the various French clubs cycle around the town, many of them in traditional or wacky 'costumes' of their Region. En route back to the ferry, we stopped at Arromanches, one of D-Day landing beaches, and visited one of the several war cemeteries nearby.



After two days at home we travelled east to Suffolk for the CTC Birthday Rides, stopping en route to visit Lesley's sister, brother and partner, plus other family members and the other accident victim, on his bike for the first time since May. The event, held at Framlingham College, was one of the best of the many we've attended over the years. The rides were mostly gentle, with nothing overly inspiring to offer, but we had reasonable weather and managed to get to Snape Maltings, home to the famed Aldeburgh Music Festival, and an RSPB nature reserve nearby. Our tent opened out onto an uninterrupted view across the river to Framlingham Castle, enticing us to dine 'at home' most evenings. Very happily we touched base, after far too many years, with former London cycling friends whom we hadn't seen since their two, now teen-age, boys were born! How comfortably we slipped back into conversation as if we'd been apart only a few months!



We stopped in at home long enough to pick up clean clothes and switch from solos to the tandem, then rode up to northern Herefordshire for the Tandem Club's annual UK rally. Although we were on familiar territory, camping, cycling, eating and chatting with so many friends and acquaintances made for another great week! We also made a concerted effort to visit the interiors of a few notable properties – Berrington Hall, Hampton Court Castle, Stokesley Castle, the Judge's Lodgings in Presteigne and the working water mill at Mortimer's Cross – all of which we had bypassed on previous occasions and all very worth the stops!!





September and October usually find us on tour somewhere, but in the hopes of getting a bit more caught up with life we restrained ourselves this year, focusing on home life and getting back onto our various 'treadmills'. An exhibition in town of the history team's progress with the High Street project and a reminiscence session with a group of older women kicked things off nicely. Radio Herefordshire even made a visit to Ledbury and interviewed Pat on the topic! We earned First Aid certificates through the Red Cross and started to plan our travels for 2012. In mid-October we ventured over to Milton Keynes for a reunion weekend with our French tour group. Nothing special scenically, but very good on the social side!

Pat's hopes of spending time sorting through recent years of photos and slides were dashed as she became immersed in



GODSPELL

the first musical our local theatre has put on, certainly for as long as we've been in Ledbury. It is a lively play from the '60s era, full of song and dance, built around the story of Jesus offering the people of his time an alternative (love) to the more rigid, rule-centric society they lived in. Pat offered to help with the lighting, but found herself given the full job of lighting director. She also usually produces simple programmes for the amateur dramatics group's plays, but this director had higher ambitions and persuaded her to develop his ideas for a large format, glossy, multi-page souvenir programme, with lots of colour photos, artwork and adverts. The learning curve was steep and the hours long, but in the end a great looking programme came back from the printers.



The cast was largely made up of young people, some not yet at university, full of talent and energy and great fun to work

with. Half way through the production, they asked if someone could produce a video of a performance so they could see what they looked like and have a record of it! This **was** rather outside her skill set, but fortunately a fellow camera club member came to her rescue ... at least for the filming stage. We then had to find and learn video editing software in order to combine wide views from one camera with close-ups from another, making sure everything was in perfect synch against one sound track! This learning 'curve' could be more correctly compared to a climbing wall, but handing across 20+ sets of DVDs at the post-production party to a very grateful cast was worth it!

A 'more of this and more of that' sort of November has passed into December, bringing various end-of-year gatherings to help make the onset of winter more tolerable. Pat is starting to work on January's Panto lighting while Mike is trying to come to grips with a new computer. The latest groans hint that not everything is going quite to plan, so we could be in for a long spell of head scratching and late nights! But we still have hopes of getting time to just 'catch up' with ourselves sometime in the near future. Meanwhile we'll enjoy reading all your cards and letters!

We hope you have had a good year, in whatever shape or form, and that you are able to enjoy the festive season with family, good friends, neighbours or even just your cat. May 2012 bring health, happiness and good experiences to all of us!