
Strauss Annual Report & Travelogue 2013

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Sitting down to write this letter with only 10 days left in the year is not our ideal timing, but life has been rather full lately. In truth, that can be said for almost any time of the year, as you're about to read. The numerous involvements to which we give a huge amount of our at-home time seem to have grown again this year, both in number and in magnitude. So did our time travelling here and there, firmly attached to two wheels.



As has become the norm, much of January was spent working on our local Panto – Puss in Boots this year – Pat setting up and running the lighting, Mike (now armed with a video-capable DSLR camera) recording three of the shows, Pat compiling the best clips into a DVD for the cast and Mike beavering away on the preparation of our UK tax return whilst serving as the household *domestique*. And the snow fell!



Coinciding not very well with her recovery from a rather ungraceful fall at the theatre (which did her back no good at all) Pat found herself taking on some of their publicity distribution, and the death of a long-standing technical volunteer pushed more lighting responsibilities in her direction. Mike further honed his video-taking skills by filming a guided tour of our historical Masters' House, given by the architect masterminding its reconstruction for community uses (see below).

One week into February, though, we were off! No longer having a parental need to visit California at that time of year, we treated ourselves to a cycling holiday in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, the two most southern states in India, a tour that had been on Pat's wish list for several years. We had a grand time! The buzz of cycling in Indian traffic mixed with the serenity of riding in very rural areas, and we were presented with endless photo opportunities: from ladies in their colourful saris to goats being guided down a road; from incredibly ornate temples to very simple but colourfully painted roadside houses;



from vast tracts of green tea plantations being hand-picked to delicate red poinsettias planted along the roads that went past them. Curious children, equally curious monkeys, tea pickers, soaring birds of prey, street vendors, watery fields filled with egrets and cormorants, sunrises and sunsets, an overnight houseboat trip and Fort Cochin's iconic fishing nets all added immensely to the experience. And to celebrate Pat's semi-significant birthday, the tour leader organised a special evening meal for the group in a roof-top restaurant, with everything from huge prawns to a chocolate cake! Limited space here can't begin to illustrate our experience, but a visit to www.flickr.com/photos/psycle/sets/72157638990063584 will show that pictures are indeed worth thousands of words. With both of us now on digital cameras, we took almost a thousand photos, though have presented a more viewer-friendly collection!

Our return to home life was rather less inspiring, but certainly not quiet. While Mike set to work filling out numerous forms for the US taxman, Pat joined a team taking bi-weekly photos of specific areas of the Masters' House as renovation work progresses, a job that will continue until the end of next summer. The aim is to turn the building into one that can be used for our library and local uses yet show off its impressive architectural features. Her task is to create a collection of stitched-together panoramas that can be viewed as a time-lapse record of how it morphed from a building greatly altered in Victorian and more recent times to a beautiful timber-framed Medieval great hall. It has been fascinating to watch builders rip out walls and floors, as they transformed the room at left (March) into the one at right (December).



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We coped with a chilly weekend in Coventry at the Tour Leaders' annual meeting, but late snow caused us to abandon most of our planned Easter weekend. Pat's usual run of work at the theatre during April (lighting, photos, programmes and posters) was interwoven with producing a semi-annual newsletter for a county-wide history group, making badges for a tandem club rally, producing route sheets for our French tour and seeing the physio. Mike was kept busy with number crunching and policy issues for the house and the tours company, though he enjoyed a day in Oxford learning more about peer-to-peer investing. Mid-way through the month we slipped away to near Chippenham for the White Horse Weekend. Poor weather and lack of fitness took the edge off the cycling, but the social side of the event was most agreeable and even put Pat in the right frame of mind to agree to doing the bookings for next year's event near Cheltenham.

As usual, May started off with the annual gathering of the Short Cranks (short ladies who tested small bikes 20 years ago), with some of us extending the weekend in North Norfolk to a full week. We were blessed with some wonderful sunny weather, making the rides, some on tracks near the sea, so much more enjoyable than had the skies been typically grey and damp. We also made the most of being on that side of the country by working in a visit to a very long-time friend whom we haven't seen in some years.



Visitors, meetings, photo sessions, lighting work and any number of preparations for being away filled the next ten days, but on the 22nd we were on the early morning train to Portsmouth and thence on a ferry to France! Over the first three days we made our way south to the Loire Valley, mostly awheel but partly by train. The weather was cooler than we had expected, but fortuitously we had booked rooms in private homes for two nights (wonderful experiences!), leaving the camping kit on the bikes. When we arrived at the Tandem International Rally, we learned that the campsite had been completely flooded out, along with all the riverside cycle routes, and we had two days of heavy rain during the week, so a few things didn't go quite to plan.

But we did camp, and we did get out on the bikes on four days, exploring the countryside north and south of the Loire, visiting the lovely town of Saumur, and most notably coming across some extensive fields of irises which lit up the whole landscape (though it took Pat some time to clean off the inch-thick layer of sticky mud her shoes attracted when she ventured into a field for photos!).



As we shifted into June, so did our focus. In one day we managed to cycle to Saumur for an early train to Tours and successfully get ourselves and our bikes on the two further trains we needed to get to Riom, where we met our camping tour group very early the next morning. It is impossible to squeeze four week's worth of experiences into one paragraph in an annual letter, but we came across some fabulous views, beautiful churches, lovely old villages and lots of interesting things we just had to stop to look at. Our route took us through a large part of the Auvergne, passing the Puy de Dome and looping south

to Le Puy before turning northeast towards Lyon, then generally following the course of the upper Loire north into the vineyards of Burgundy. It was one of the hilliest tours we've done, but possibly one of the most scenically rewarding. There is a small collection of photos on our Flickr page, though more photos (and possibly some useful captions!) will be added, hopefully before the new year dawns! (www.flickr.com/photos/psycle/sets/72157634703057423/)



We were barely home before the Ledbury Poetry Festival commenced in early July: ten days of running up and down between house and town, listening to some very inspirational poetry (and some not so...), stewarding some of the events, putting up and getting to know some poets at the weekends and generally making the most of the concentrated chance to think and feel and ponder in reaction to the carefully-crafted spoken word. The rest of the month passed in a blur of making hundreds of souvenir name badges and other home-based activities, but it also presented an opportunity for Pat to become involved in setting up a new website for the theatre.

Having got local matters somewhat under control, we headed off at the end of July for France (yet again), for their national cycling gathering, the Semaine Federale, based this year in Nantes in Brittany, presenting us with our third visit to the river Loire this summer! We spent rather more time cycling in and out of that large city and its suburbs than we liked, however there were some notable compensations. The city itself was well worth a day's worth of wandering around and a very

enjoyable pavement-cafe lunch. The camaraderie of the group we were with also qualifies. We had booked in 18 people from our usual French tours crowd, and all of us camped together very socially. At one of the refreshment stops, a young woman entertained us with a very interesting old hand-cranked organ, complete with boxes of punched cards she fed through the machine to generate music to accompany her singing. Many of her songs were



Edith Piaf's, and her voice could almost convince us that Edith was there in person. A third interest was located in Nantes itself, on an island in the Loire, where lives The Great Elephant. A motor-driven mechanical beast, 12m tall and 21m long, he periodically parades through a large paved area (former shipyards) carrying passengers and spraying viewers with water through his swaying trunk – a unique spectacle! You can even watch a 2 minute video of him in motion on www.flickr.com/photos/psycle/11571166114/.

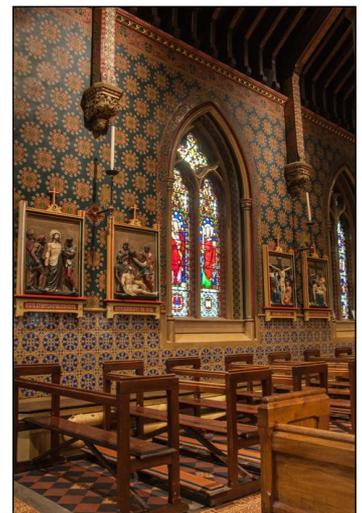


From there we decamped to Somerset for four days of the Tandem Club's UK Rally. Spread out grid-fashion over a very large open field just off a main road south of Weston-super-Mare, the ambiance was dramatically different to our experience in France, but the company was good. The hillier routes took us into the Mendips, from where there were some extensive views, but others were flatter, encouraging us to do longer rides, one of which took us to Glastonbury. Compared to the Puy de Dome in the Auvergne, Glastonbury Tor was decidedly less dramatic, but it did make a nice feature in an otherwise unnotable landscape. The numerous waterways of the Somerset Levels also added to the scenery.



With a spare Saturday night in hand, we squeezed in a flying overnight visit to friends near Taunton. Volunteer stewards on the West Somerset Railway, they were already booked to serve on a special dinner run that evening, but after a couple of phone calls got the OK for us to join the train for the ride to Minehead and back so long as we sat in the workers' carriage and ate our own food! The weather could have been a lot better for the views, but it was an enjoyable experience and gave us a nice visit (and two bike rides, from and to Taunton) with them.

Three trains later we were in Stoke-on-Trent at the CTC Birthday Rides. The countryside is quite pleasant, if not particularly remarkable, but for us the nicest feature was the canals, crossing them two or three times on some days and watching the boats negotiate the locks. We spent one entire outward journey riding alongside the Trent & Mersey Canal, reading all the information boards along the way. A Pugin-designed church in Cheadle was also a noteworthy focus for a ride, its decor more akin to some stately homes we've visited than a church.



We stopped at home for a few days to take in the annual Upper Hall BBQ and Bank Holiday Carnival, then were off again for a long weekend on the south coast at the Flying Gate Rally at Emsworth, near Havant. Highlights included Nelson's Monument and Fort Nelson, home to a fascinating armouries museum, enjoying ice creams in the sun by the pretty village of Bosham at one branch of Chichester Harbour, and a dawn photo visit (for Pat) to another branch of the harbour.

It was 'hit the ground running' when we settled at home again, being busy with all our usual activities, but also catching up on what we'd not done during August! Two very good friends from the States paid us a long-overdue visit, and we went to our first 'live screening' – a live broadcast of *Turandot* from the Royal Opera House in London. The chance to see such first class productions in the comfort of our local theatre has certainly been given high priority in our calendar! We led a local Tandem Club ride on one weekend, getting everyone back for tea and cakes just before the deluge, and were privileged to be able to take advantage of a special open day of a local Arts & Crafts house, Perrycroft, on the next.



On the final weekend of the month we went up to Stratford for a friend's surprise birthday party, took a train mid-evening to Leamington Spa to stay with another friend for the night, then cycled up to Birmingham Airport on the Sunday, as one more trip was in store, this time to Mallorca, our second CTC tour this year led by someone else. We had been there once before on our own, but after a gap of 30 years it felt as if it was our first visit. The route took us through both some of the popular coastal areas as well as the more arid inland expanses, presenting us with some unusual interests, including salt extraction pools, flamingoes, a field of cactus balls, an underground mausoleum, Mallorcan-style windmills and an old monastery where we stayed a night. Cycling with the group most of the

time was unusual for us (on the tours we lead, everyone spreads out to suit themselves) but also great fun, as we were able to share experiences as they happened. A lovely surprise for us was learning that Father Junipero Serra, well known for establishing the missions throughout California, was born on the island. When we cycled into his home town we made a beeline for the church, only to find it had only just shut for the afternoon!! On the last day, just before cycling to the airport, Pat and Linda (tour leader) sat on a beach wall and mused about skipping that flight ...

But duty called, and Pat had only one day at home before moving down to the theatre for an intensive few days of transforming a dull black stage into a jazzy karaoke-pub (lighting miracle needed!) for *Girls' Night*, a new musical play that has gone over very well in the States. Talk about a challenge! But with a bit of help, the effect was achieved, and the show was a brilliant success. Mike enjoyed it so much he videoed all three nights! A reunion of our French tour in York on the following weekend gave us our final outing for the year.



November brought us back to our 'normal' collection of activities but also a lot of good theatre, including another live broadcast, *Richard II* from the Royal Shakespeare Company. Added to a lot of theatre work, Pat spent most of her waking hours preparing the documentation for the nearly 80 tours in the CTC Holidays programme, selecting photos for our Kerala book and compiling the best of six hours of *Girls' Night* video clips to create one show to put onto a DVD for the cast members. However, this tunnel has a light at the end, in that she has started to pass on some of her theatre printing and publicity jobs and to train up a new lighting team. Meanwhile, Mike remained happily glued to his computer, preparing the accounts and working out next year's budget figures for the Upper Hall Estate as well as compiling financial projections for the next season of CTC tours.

These past three weeks have been a rush of Christmas lunches and parties, a visit from another American friend, more photo work, more lighting work, more nights at the theatre, putting up performers, creating and sending out cards and writing this letter. Whew! Time to stop, turn off the computers, put up all the lovely the cards we've received and start enjoying the Holidays! We hope you have had a good year and are spending, or are about to spend, an enjoyable final week of it with family and/or good friends, celebrating Christmas or not as you wish, and looking forward to a happy and healthy New Year!

Pat & Mike

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More photos (and/or larger versions) can be seen on www.flickr.com/photos/pscycycle/sets. Annual reports are on www.strauss.org.uk.

