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# Strauss Annual Report & Travelogue 2017

## vol 3, no 19

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Sitting down at the end of a year to write our annual letter poses a huge challenge for us - how to condense what could be a book down to a few pages! This year proves no exception, having worked in two short and two long holidays and some weekends away around a rather full home life.



For the second year in a row we saw the New Year in with friends in Bath, spending a few relaxing days with them. No bikes, no computers, no rushing around like blue-bottle flies, just chatting and eating, working jigsaw puzzles and going for short walks. But then it was straight into planning and setting up the lighting for panto! Projecting an animated cartoon onto the black curtains and trying to make a dungeon look gloomy while lighting the actors provided Pat with a couple of challenges, but it was funny and colourful, night after night after night...! Mike was kept busy generating nearly 500GB of video material over four nights, leaving Pat to decide which were the 'best bits' to use in the final cut.

February brought three performances of what turned out to be an award-winning production of The Last Bread Pudding, directed by an upward-bound young member of our local am dram group. The lighting was mostly pretty standard for Pat (as was Mike's video job), but for one of the performances she had to learn how to set up and run the lights from a computer program rather than a manual lighting desk. One of life's little challenges! Creating an exhibition of photos of Ledbury's historic buildings for the launch of a new Joined Up Heritage project was all in a day's work for Pat, but recording a visit by the Duke of Gloucester, making sure every group of people he spoke to was captured, brought yet another challenge. Mike kept well out of the way, catching up on his filing and working on our tax return.



With the arrival of spring, Pat headed back down to Bentleys Castle Fruit Farm near Newent every couple of weeks photographing the emergence of new life on the fruit trees. Tiny hints of buds soon evolved into tiny flowers, and before long pink and white blossoms spread all over the orchards, creating an amazingly beautiful scene. Then tiny fruits began to appear. Laying out fields for new plantings, pruning, spraying and putting up bird boxes were all dutifully documented, but the fun came when a batch of new apple trees arrived for planting and she was allowed to take photos from a specially designed vehicle that was systematically digging a trench for a team of two workers to drop the new trees into, then filling it over, all while constantly on the move.



Cycling part way to and from the Tour Managers' weekend in Staffordshire got us out on our bikes for the first time in the year – slow going, but it felt good to be awheel again, and a cycling weekend in the Cheltenham area worked off a few more cobwebs (and excess winter food). However, for our big event we switched to walking. This year marked our 40th wedding anniversary (how time flies!!), and to mark the occasion with something special, we ventured off to the Isles of Scilly at the end of March. Blessed by good weather, we enjoyed long walks along rocky coastlines and sandy beaches, across fields and through small woods, gorse and daffodils adding a cheerful splash of colour. Being there before the start

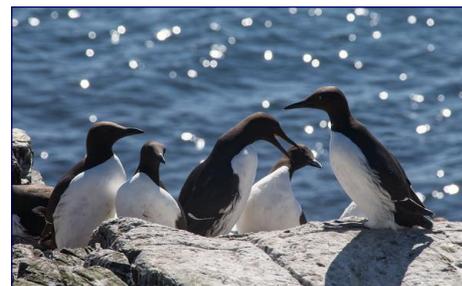


of their busy period, we had the footpaths nearly to ourselves! An added attraction was flying between Exeter and the islands in a small plane!



April was busy with activities at home - theatre lighting, creating route sheets for our camping tour, general planning for our August expedition, more visits to the farm, more desk work for Mike, sorting out photos, history groups activities, etc. We opted to stay at home for Easter, but made up for that at the beginning of May by spending a week in Northumberland with the Short Cranks. Based near the coast, not far from Seahouses, we cycled north to Lindisfarne and south to Alnwick, taking in Craster, Bamburgh and Chillingham Castle in the middle. Some of the hills proved challenging, but the weather was very good, the views fantastic, and the company, as always, was great! The

highlight, though, was a boat trip out to the Farne Islands, home to some 13 zillion puffins, shags, eider ducks, kittiwakes, guillemots, terns and other assorted sea birds, not to mention some 6000 grey seals! Cruising around the edges of the main island provided numerous opportunities to view the densely packed colonies clinging onto the bare rock face, its dark grey stone having being well streaked white by the birds, and numerous packs of seals in the water or sunning themselves on the low-lying rocks. An hour on land enabled us to get a closer look at many species, some perched on a flat piece of rock smaller than a human footprint, others nesting where they had found a larger patch. None of them seemed the least bit bothered by our presence!



After a couple of frantically busy weeks at home we were off again to lead our annual camping tour in France.



Starting in Orange, we meandered north into the Vercors over the first two weeks, then descended into the Rhone Valley for another fortnight, looping south then back north to finish in Valence. Three highlights came in the first half: having the magnificent Mt Ventoux in view on a number of days (but not having to cycle up it!); the very moving memorial cemetery and ever so informative museum in Vassieux-en-Vercors commemorating the French resistance against the Nazis in WW2; and the spectacular descent from the mountains along the precipitous Combe Laval balcony road. It was a glorious tour, though exceptionally hot weather during the second half somewhat detracted from our enjoyment, and there were precious few 'flat' roads on the routes, but hills bring views, and we certainly had many of those! Looking back on the 900+



photos we took, the scenery was nothing short of stunning, with mountains ever-present on the horizon. Extensive fields of lavender vied with immense outcrops of bare rock for wow-factor moments, as did a large flock of sheep being driven up into the mountains and sightings of vultures and eagles soaring overhead.

July, as usual, featured the Ledbury Poetry Festival, now probably the largest event of its kind in the country. Aside from several thoughtful or humorous readings by poets, we particularly enjoyed an evening of songs of Federico Garcia Lorca, a prominent 20th-century Spanish writer, and two mornings of selections from various versions of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, the stories entertainingly told by three Ledbury poets. We also hosted the fourth reunion of the group we went to Kerala with a few years ago. Somehow we squeezed everyone into beds in our house and a neighbour's! It was good to show them the beauty of our local area, even if it's not as dramatic as North Yorkshire, the Lake District or Devon, venues of previous reunions. And we had a really good time together!



Two days later we were on our way to Germany, and after two days of rail and ferry travel, we arrived in Trier on the Mosel near Luxembourg. Having scheduled a full day there, we walked from one end of this attractive town to the other and back again, spending a couple of very worthwhile hours in the house of Karl Marx, now a museum of his life and writings as well as the history of Communism. We learned a lot about both and came out with a better understanding of what was going on politically in the 19th and early 20th century in many parts of the world.

The following day we set out on a five-week cycling adventure across parts of Germany and the Czech Republic!

We spent most of the first week pedalling down superb cycle paths and small roads along the Mosel river to Koblenz. Never before had we seen so many vineyards so closely packed together on the hills!! Every square inch of arable space was utilised, with specially designed vehicles running up and down the



rows on rails. Some hills seemed too steep to access on foot! Two overnight stops, Punderich and Cochem, were particularly attractive towns for exploring on foot, though there was a general proliferation of highly-decorated timber-framed buildings all along the way. Also of note were the several 'Strausswirtschaft' signs we saw, indicating a wine tavern run for part of the year by a local winegrower serving his own wine. We thought they saw us coming ...!

The Mosel empties into the Rhine at Koblenz, where again we spent an entire day walking our socks off admiring so many beautiful buildings, squares, fountains and churches, not to mention the riverside itself. One memorable 'fountain' was a statue of a little boy who periodically spewed water out of his mouth onto the square. We had great fun trying to take photos of his antics, particularly at night!



A day and a half riding south along the Rhine brought us to Bingen (of Hildegard fame), where we turned west to Oberhausen on the Nahe, the base for the International Tandem Rally and week two of our travels. The first two days were nice, enhancing our visit to the spa town of Bad Kreuznach with its fascinating salt-water-evaporation towers, next to which people sit and breathe in the mineral-rich droplets in the air for health benefits.

A very wet day followed, bringing out all the slugs within a 5-mile radius, but the sun returned for our visit to Mainz the following day. We marvelled at the stunning blue Chagall windows in St Stephan's church and were fascinated by the Gutenberg museum's exhibits of printing equipment from various parts of the world, including an extensive array of Chinese characters and an old working press, demonstrated before our very eyes. 'Water', however, was fast becoming the theme of this holiday, as we sat out much of a further wet day in someone's caravan and spent the final day trying to dry out our camping kit so we could send it home with another couple.



For week three we took trains to Würzburg then cycled south, loosely following the Romantic Road via the very attractive old towns of Rothenburg, Dinkelsbühl and Nördlingen, then east along the Altmühl. Mostly we were on well-signed, well-surfaced, purpose-made network of cycle tracks, the extent of which gave the impression of an entire alternative 'road' system for cycles. However, there were times when our pre-planned route took us deep into woods and onto rough dirt tracks, which on more than one occasion became too muddy or churned up to continue on, forcing us to retrace. Our only way forward at a flooded ford was to walk



across a grassy field and around a lake to get to a road, and we had to haul our bikes up some steep steps to a bridge we needed to use to cross a river! But a delightful riverside path led us to Regensburg on the Danube and thence to the Czech Republic.





Google showed the border crossing we had chosen to be usable, however our road dead-ended at a little hut that once served as a checkpoint. A long stretch of questionably-rideable grass led to a thick wood in the direction where we wanted to go, which, upon a quick check of the map, looked to be two or three miles to the first road on the other side! So we retraced to the last signpost we'd seen, did some quick map reading and headed for a more northerly crossing point.



There Mike noted a 'shortcut' we could take, so off we went, very soon dropping down a very steep track, then struggling to push our bikes up a similarly steep hill on the other side of a tiny little stream. Mike's Garmin convinced him we were never 'lost', but we continued through mud and up more steep climbs for well over an hour without seeing another soul. By the time we finally got back to civilisation, we had actually slogged through the woods for *four* miles!



Over the next four days we traversed the Czech countryside in a north-easterly direction through pleasant, if not stunning, scenery. The towns were often a mix of faded elegance and civic pride, with many attractive buildings but also crumbling edifices, often showing traces of Communist influence. Two pull-on-the-brakes surprises we encountered were the decaying ruins of the former Nimrod hotel/restaurant, previously a WW2 army hospital and sanatorium, and a parade of buildings in a very sorry state that had been a spa complex in their day. Then there was the town of Most, whose historical centre, and indeed its entire character, was demolished in the 1960s to make room for the expanding lignite mining industry and an overwhelming number of low-cost, standardized, multifamily housing blocks built of precast concrete panels. Seen from a distance it looked quite forbidding; close up, although the buildings were painted in lively colours, the town evoked no sense of cheer or hope. But other towns provided a strong contrast to that feeling of desolation, and the quiet roads and 'cycle tracks' generally offered a pleasant experience ... when they were rideable...



Crossing north back into Germany, we followed a more relaxed schedule so we could spend time in Dresden, Meissen, Leipzig and Magdeburg, cities that were part of East Germany not so long ago. In each there was a sense of being half-way between the more affluent western part of the country and the slightly more rustic Czech Republic we'd just left. The historic (and rebuilt city) centre of Dresden, destroyed during the war, gave an amazing appearance of almost never having been touched, through we were surprised to see flattened areas only now being developed. It was a stately city, with many elegant buildings, lots of life and much to see. Cycling to Meissen along



the Elbe was refreshing (as had been cycling along so many rivers along the way!) but left us with only just enough time to visit the famous porcelain works and museum. Demonstrations of the various techniques used in creating works of art enhanced our appreciation of the skills involved, as did so many pieces in the museum, but our 'no space in the panniers' mantra got us through the sales room with our life savings intact!

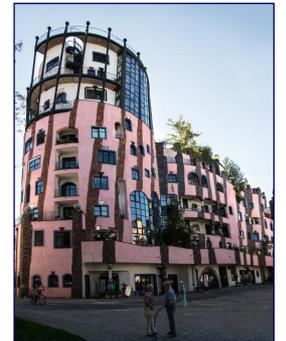




Leipzig was more arty: a colourful and fanciful mural, depicting the unity of Germany, decorated the side of the Marriott; buildings and fountains were colourfully lit at night - even the rail station was a blaze of glass and coloured lights; and a busy town square had people dressed in monk's robes celebrating the 500th anniversary of the publication of Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses*. We spent a happy hour or more absorbing as much as our brains could in the Bach museum after enjoying a wonderful organ/choir concert in neighbouring St Thomas's church. By the time we got to Magdeburg, we were probably getting 'cited-out', however the fanciful buildings of the 21st century Hundertwasserhaus provided a welcome antidote!



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Cycling between these cities provided a much-appreciated balance for us, especially when we found ourselves on cycle tracks that meandered through wooded areas or along rivers. Blue skies, green fields and tall trees were a near-constant visual treat, and the flatness of the terrain was most welcome. One memorable stretch on our last day of cycling took us on yet another four-mile adventure through a densely wooded area just alongside the Elbe, though a continuous run of concrete slabs through it spared us from concerns of not finding an exit at the other end! We stretched out this day as long as we could, musing on all the riding we'd done, the varied nature of the tracks and roads, the myriad views we'd enjoyed, the amazing luck we'd had with the weather, how many places we'd seen (almost all for the first time!), how well we'd done with the accommodation (thanks to AirB&B and booking.com) and how fortunate we were to be able to do this when not exactly in the prime of our lives.



Home had to wait a bit longer, as we diverted directly to the annual Flying Gate weekend when we got off the ferry at Harwich. The area around Burton-on-Trent might not offer England's most spectacular scenery, but the 'Gaters' offer exceptionally good company, and it was a fun and gentle way of slipping back into the real world!

Our autumn calendars were instantly busy with theatre activities, cycling events, Pat keeping two sets of accounts straight at the Master's House while Mike tended to those of the Upper Hall estate, more photo sessions for Pat at the farm plus a session of cider apples being shook from their trees, Mike getting stuck into more tax work and Pat being elected to take on the role of Treasurer for the theatre society. It doesn't leave much spare time! We've had our first snowfall of the winter – 8 inches in one day; the heaviest for nearly 20 years! – and attended all but one last Christmas party, so it seems safe to draw the line at what has been a very full year. Of necessity, this has been a very abridged version, missing out a lot of good things that got woven into what we have recorded, but if you really want to know more, do ask!

We hope you've had a good year and are ready to face 2018 in good health and good spirit!

*Pat & Mike*

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