
Strauss Annual Report & Travelogue 2023

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Another good year for us has come and gone, safely we are happy to report! Lots of comings and goings and interesting things here at home occupied our time as well to keep us well out of mischief.

January was, as usual, full of panto work for Pat, with Mike keeping things going at home. It was our theatre's first normal panto production since lockdown, and it was great to watch one of our very competent teenagers playing a wonderful Snow White and other junior members creating some wacky characters, adding so much to the production. Lots more photos on www.flickr.com/photos/lads-ledbury/albums.



Although February was comparatively quiet, March brought our only snow of the winter, closely followed by an explosion of early Spring. We



spent four lovely Sundays that month cycling amongst the daffodils some 6-8 miles south of here. A woman in Pat's front of house team at the theatre used a bike to get around town, so she was asked if she might be interested in joining us one Sunday. She did and was utterly amazed that there were so many large fields full of such flowers anywhere!!! I suppose we were too when we first moved to Ledbury, but we still derive great enjoyment from seeing them each year.

For the long Easter weekend we joined the Tandem Club, camping in Rutland. Not wanting to push Pat's still-strengthening ankle too far, we kept our day rides short. They were pleasant enough, but keeping warm enough while cooking and eating dinner in the porch of our tent was a bit of a challenge. For the first time in years we were glad of our down sleeping bags! Although the social side of the weekend would have been enough to keep us going for another day, waking to a fog-bound campsite on the Sunday morning convinced us that going home a day early would be a good move!

In mid-May we headed up to Scotland for a few days for our annual reunion with the Short Cranks, celebrating our 30th year together! We started in Edinburgh, working in a much-overdue visit with a couple we hadn't seen for years, then set off on our bikes north/west for maybe 20 miles or so the following day, much of it on cycle tracks following old railway lines and passing through the beautiful grounds of the Dalmeny Estate, to Inverkeithing where the reunion was based. Being in the company of these long-standing friends, as always, provided a large part of the enjoyment, as did some nice short rides with morning, lunch, afternoon tea and photo stops worked in. The icing on the cake, though, was cycling across the old Forth road bridge, on a segregated cycle lane, three times. For more than a mile each way we were suspended high above the river, enjoying extensive views, with no more than the occasional bus on the main carriageway to break the peaceful spell. The contrast between the iconic red cross-bracing of the rail bridge and the white 'sails' of the new road bridge, were striking.



May also brought the Coronation. Not much to describe about that, as probably many of you, like us, watched lots of it on the telly. We found it very impressive for its regal style and the amazing precision with which everything went to plan. Charles looked a bit uncomfortable with all his regalia on at some points; not sure it is really his style. But all seems to be going smoothly enough on that front now.

By the end of May we were in France - Brittany to be precise - for a month. Our first week was at the International Tandem Rally in Scaër, followed by three weeks of our Strauss Tour. Both went very well, and we enjoyed nearly continuous blue skies and sunshine the whole time!

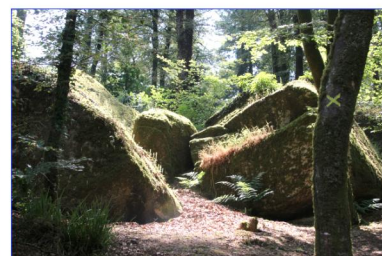
There were enough Tandem Club members at the rally to enable us to take over an entire campsite for the week, which made it feel like living in a small village made up just of fellow cyclists, many of whom we know. This area wasn't particularly photogenic, more just pleasant, but the week provided a complete change of pace, the freedom from any organisational responsibilities giving us a much-needed chance to unwind from our busier home life.



The indisputable highlight of the week, though, was an amazing cavalcade of 18 first class huge floats, maybe 20-feet tall and twice as long, which paraded around the town on the Sunday, each one a fantastic and ingenious creation featuring some sort of beastie or fictional character, accompanied by a large band of magnificent drummers and lots of colourful, often scantily-clad, dancers. Unsurprisingly, the float featuring the three ladies and overworked cyclist from the film *Belleville Rendezvous* was our favourite! Nearly 200 photos between us still need to be weeded down to a more sensible number to go up on Pat's Flickr site one day...

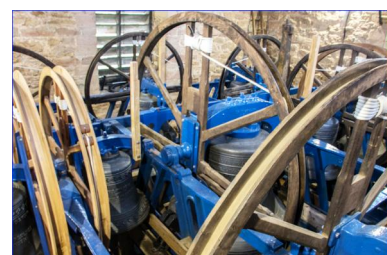


That laid-back existence changed somewhat when our regular 'group' of about 20 people came over from England. As usual on our tours, we stayed in each campsite for three nights, allowing two days at each one to cycle freely around the area, taking in the scenery and cultural sites. The highlights of the first two weeks were the incredible sculpted stone Calvaries in the grounds of most churches, unique to the part of Brittany we were in, and the massive jumble of huge rocks in Huelgoat that seem to have tumbled down a river bed in ancient times.



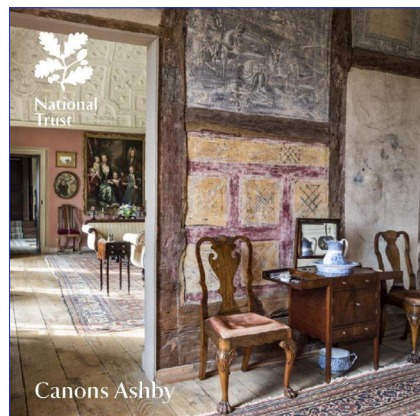
We spent much of our third week riding alongside or close to the sea in the area north and west of Brest, a coastline noted for long stretches of jagged rocks, jutting away from the land like knarled fingers, more huge rocks clumped in intriguing formations, and several very tall lighthouses piercing the skyline. Our cameras were kept rather busy!

As usual, the Ledbury Poetry Festival was our focus during the first ten days or so of July. One unusual session was held in the bell tower of Ledbury church, with the tower captain and his wife reading poems written about the bells and explaining how they were rung. Then we were off again for three more escapades. First was a week at the Semaine Federale in France in an area we've not been to before, where some 5000 cyclists from France (mostly) and Britain descended on a small town between Nancy and Metz. The scenery wasn't especially impressive, and we missed the usual added attraction of old or



decorated bikes put outside houses along the routes, but we had a relaxing time and enjoyed the company of a new-to-us tandem couple camped next to us. She is an academic, involved in setting the specifics of what was taught in schools in one area of England, and he is a Professor of Sound, leading to some rather interesting conversations. We got soaking wet on one afternoon finding nowhere to shelter, abandoned another ride mid-morning having not gone very far because of more rain, and sat out much of yet another wet day in our tent. Fortunately we'd brought a book of puzzles and a special issue of *Scientific American* on *The Brain*, which helped fill the time nicely, and a sheltered area where people could cook and eat in the evenings provided a useful social venue.

Back in the UK, for week two we were on our own, making our way from Northampton to Stratford-upon-Avon. That involved only two days of moving on, but having six free days gave us the chance stay three nights in each of two B&Bs. At the first, an outbuilding of a characterful old vicarage, we had a large room with a small kitchen adjacent, which we made use of to cook dinners on two nights. Very cosy! The second, in Banbury was a small private house owned by a lady who is a regional sales manager for a national cycling manufacturer!



She was most impressed at the cycling that two mid-70-year olds were doing, our bikes loaded to the gunnels! At each stop we did a ride to a large old National Trust house. Canons Ashby was noteworthy for showing the original hand-painted 'decoration' on some of the walls and ceilings – quite a contrast to the more elaborate interiors one tends to find in historic houses. It opened up a new period of decorative history in our consciousness! The man who purchased Upton House in 1927 was co-founder of Shell Oil, spending his millions on purchasing large paintings and ceramics, expanding his already large house to display it all, but also in creating somewhat unusual landscaped gardens.



On a more altruistic level, he was also engaged in serious philanthropy in the local community. We reached our saturation limit before viewing every exhibit but got a good idea of what someone with a bit of spare cash could do with it. Uncharacteristically, the stewards in both houses were happy to chat informally at length with visitors and enlighten them about all sorts of details related to the buildings and their owners. Well-spent days, though surprisingly hardly any photos.

By the time we got to the UK Tandem Rally, based at the racecourse in Stratford-upon-Avon, August was well under way, though it hadn't brought summer weather, so we were grateful for the use of a room in the grandstand building where we could sit with others, eating at chairs and tables and chatting til late in the evenings – something we did with great enthusiasm! Nothing special to mention about any of the rides, but Pat worked in a tour of Stratford's famous theatre one afternoon. What impressed her the most was the size of the lanterns used to light the stage!!! The ones she's worked with in Ledbury's theatre are rather puny in comparison. We also spent a very worthwhile hour or so at the Stratford Armouries, just north of the town, taking in a very interesting Winston Churchill exhibition.

Our final outing of the year took us to the sizzling heights of Uttoxeter in Staffordshire for the gathering of Flying Gate owners. Again the rides took us through pleasant if not remarkable countryside. However, riding with and spending down time with another group of people we've got to know over the years made it a most enjoyable weekend. (You've probably worked out by now that this is a common thread to our cycling life...) Mike's Flying Gate bike did receive notoriety, though, when a photo of it, taken in summer 2002, appeared in an article in *Cycle* magazine by the author who saw it in St Malo our first morning!

We do have a 'home life', keeping us pretty busy in between our excursions. Mike continues to be responsible for planning meals and providing what is needed for them. He enjoys selecting things from supermarkets' internet sites, finding they offer a wider choice than we have here in town. His job as Treasurer of the building keeps him somewhat occupied, as does paying the bills and trying to keep our savings in accounts that pay a reasonable rate of interest to cover them. Our having two desktop computers, two laptops, six printers, two smart phones and three smart watches means his technical skills are frequently put to use in making something work right. His current focus is putting together the specs for two new

computers, ours being rather long in the tooth (and showing it in terms of performance) and still running Windows 7.

Much of Pat's time gets taken up with theatre work – lighting, front of house duties and managing the accounts plus the design/printing/distribution of programmes and posters. However, the recruitment of new younger members with more technical expertise has enabled her to greatly reduce her lighting work, and one of the leading stewards relieved her of the job of Front of House co-ordinator part way through the year. She also makes badges for three cycling events during the year, produces a total of five newsletters for two organisations, hosts French classes, is assistant leader of a U3A photography group, does most of the planning for our tours and volunteers at our local Heritage Centre and the Master's House. We are both grateful, though, that our involvements are rarely so onerous that they keep us up too late at night or prod us out of bed too early in the morning. And now and then we actually get out for a local cycle ride!!

Ledbury's theatre also largely shaped our cultural life. Live performances from visiting companies as well as our local am dram group, satellite screenings of plays, operas and ballets from London and other major UK theatres, plus live musical concerts ranging from Rock 'n Roll and Gypsy Jazz to Leonard Cohen and Big Band all provided a good balance to our usual radio diet of classical music.

Though another year older, we are both in reasonably good shape. There are parts of us that give a bit of grief from time to time, but not enough to stop us from keeping quite active and getting out a lot on our bikes, whether on a short ride from home or a four-week venture in France. Our general drill is that when someone asks how we are, we simply smile and say 'I'm still here', then reverse the question ... or change the subject. Sadly we've lost some good friends during the year, though most of the annual letters we've received these past few weeks have been encouraging, bringing us up to date on your adventures and/or family life. We hope life is treating each of you well and wish you a Happy Holiday season, however you spend it, as well as all the best for the new year.



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More photos/larger versions can be found on www.flickr.com/photos/psycle/albums

Annual reports are on www.strauss.org.uk. Printed copies happily sent upon request.