

SEINE SORTIE

Dieppe - Dijon - Le Havre



July 2012

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- 1 ***Mr Derek McMinn FRCS, Mr Robert Middleton FRCS and their surgical and support teams:*** they resurfaced Damian's hips in 1999 and 2001, respectively, giving him a new lease of life.
- 2 ***Terry and Mike Walsh:*** who encouraged us to start cycle touring. Mike shared with us every detail of his route from Le Havre to Paris.
- 3 ***Mary and Tim Hoyle:*** who shared details of their route from Dieppe to Paris and pointed us towards
- 4 ***Donald Hirsch:*** whose website was the source of their information and gave us the start of our return route outwards from Paris.
- 5 ***David 'Q' May:*** whose website gave us our route from Paris to Fontainebleau.

All our travelogues can be found at:

<https://sites.google.com/site/lesdeuxcyclistes/>

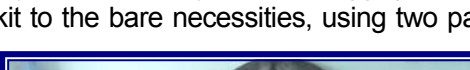
FORWARD

For some time I had wanted to cycle to the Eiffel Tower in Paris. The idea was crystallised while we were with Nikki and family in Baltimore in December 2011 when we learnt that Nikki's parents-in-law, Ellen and Shale, were going to be in Paris in July 2012 with Lily and Sadie Heller. In a slightly off-the-cuff way, I suggested we'd meet them and we'd cycle there. That was it, Seine Sortie was born!

As soon as Christmas was over we started serious planning and expanding the adventure to going upstream to the source of the Seine, which neatly mirrored our Loire trip downstream from source to sea. The scope then spread to include the source of the River Ignon, which feeds the Saône, and therefore the Rhône and thus the Mediterranean.

We considered including the source of the Marne, though this last proved to be a river too far. Many evenings were spent poring over IGN¹ maps, planning the optimum interesting route and avoiding where possible those LSA² which have marked previous journeys. We also needed to be very sure about our accommodation. We had the deadline of meeting 'The Americans' in Paris, we could not trust to luck and I don't 'do' tents. On the American side, their party had expanded to include Ellen's sister, husband and daughter.

As on our previous four (lovely) trips we carry our own luggage. Over the years, we have refined our kit to the bare necessities, using two panniers weighing about 8-9lbs each. The challenge was to pack suitable clothes to meet 'The Americans' and for once I included a skirt - a rare luxury! As before, my hair curling wand is non-negotiable and is the first item in the pannier!



Kit for 20 days on the road

¹ Institut Géographie Nationale

² Lung Searing Ascents

As on previous trips, we factored in some 'must-sees', Monet's garden at Giverny, the Château of Fontainebleau, the Orangerie Museum and more of Paris. The real bonus was that we would be in Paris on 14 July, Bastille Day. This prospect was truly exciting! Cycling over the Pont de Normandie was going to be a highlight - we did not expect it to turn out quite as it did!

In the end we cycled 612 miles. We met kindness and incredulity in equal measure. The weather was not great but better than England. Will this be the last one - who knows, there is still the possibility of cycling to Santiago de Compostela but an awful lot of that route lies in Spain and what is the spanish for 'puncture' - it's a thought

September 2012

OUR ROUTE FROM DIEPPE TO LE HAVRE

via Giverny

Paris

Fontainebleau

Source of the Seine

Source of the Ignon

Dijon

Paris again and

Pont Audemer



ROUTE & MILEAGE SUMMARY

Srl	Date	From → To	Distance	
			(mls)	(kms)
1	30 Jun	Bournemouth → Newhaven (Seaford)	14	23
2	01 Jul	Newhaven → Dieppe → Neufchatel-en-Bray	24	39
3	02 Jul	Neufchatel-en-Bray → Bus-St-Remy	54	87
4	03 Jul	Bus-St-Remy → Orgeval	44	71
5	04 Jul	Orgeval → Eiffel Tower	34	55
6	05 Jul	Paris	6	10
7	06 Jul	Paris → Barbizon	42	68
8	07 Jul	Barbizon → Moret sur Loing	13	21
9	08 Jul	Moret sur Loing → Villiers-aux-Corneilles	55	89
10	09 Jul	Villiers-aux-Corneilles → Troyes	32	51
11	10 Jul	Troyes → Mussy-sur-Seine	43	69
12	11 Jul	Mussy-sur-Seine → Baigneux-les-juifs	40	64
13	12 Jul	Baigneux-les-juifs → Dijon	43	69
15	13 Jul	Dijon → Paris	3	5
16	14 Jul	Paris	6	10
17	15 Jul	Paris	12	19
17	16 Jul	Paris → Maule	31	50
18	17 Jul	Maule → Cailly-sur-Eure	43	69
19	18 Jul	Cailly-sur-Eure → Pont Audemer	47	76
20	19 Jul	Pont Audemer → Le Havre → Bournemouth	26	42
		TOTALS	612	987

Day 1

Bournemouth → Portsmouth → Seaford

Saturday, 30 June

14 mls (22kms)

After six months of careful planning, we embark on our adventure with a quick run to Portsmouth, bikes and panniers loaded in the car. By prior arrangement, we park opposite the Royal Mail sorting office. It's close to the railway station and as safe a location as any. Even so, as we leave the car, we wonder if, when we return, it will have wheels, and/or wing mirrors, will there be petrol in the tank, will it start? Once safely on the train, we are pleased to note that, in the seven years since our Loire trip, South West Trains have made great advances in bike carrying. The provision for loading and securing bikes in transit has undergone a sea-change. Then, one was left with the impression that travelling with a bike was some sort of deviant behaviour. Now, it seems positively mainstream, there are four bikes in our carriage alone, and ticket collectors not only smile benignly but express interest - a sea change indeed.



Leaving Bournemouth

We are travelling to Seaford to catch the morning ferry out of Newhaven to Dieppe. Seaford has many memories for me. Fifty years ago I started my boarding school career there and made a lifelong friendship with Katy Powell née Jones. The Downs ceased to exist as a school in 1964 and became a sports centre.

We find the White Lion Hotel easily. It's hardly a destination of choice but clean and only a 20 minute cycle ride from the ferry terminal. On the principle that time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted, we retrace this journey. We must be at the port at 8.30 am and there will be no margin for error.

We then visit the old school. With the exception of the dining room, which was little more than a Nissen hut in those days, the rest is easily recognisable: Main Building, the Annexes, the labs, of which there were only two - The Downs majored in turning out nice young 'gals'; it was not 'big' in the sciences - Tower House (for lessons) and Bydown (more dormitories), all are there and prompt a flood of memories. In a surreal moment, I find myself outside what had been the headmistress's study. I well remember standing in this very place 48 years ago, in gym tunic and fawn ankle socks, waiting to be 'carpeted' for some minor (or major) transgression.

Interestingly, I note that part of the 'Mem' gardens has been annexed by Seaford Pétanque Squad. It is well laid out for two pitches, quite unlike the informal arrangements the french would make.

We hit the hay relatively early. Frankly, there is not much in Seaford to divert us and we have a very early start tomorrow.



***Formal entrance to the Downs.
Now known as The Downs Leisure Centre.
In my school days this door was used
only on visiting days
by parents returning their daughters.***

Day 2

Newhaven → St Martin l'Hortier via Dieppe 24 miles (38kms)

Sunday, 1 July

We wake up to rain! Nice as it would be wait for the skies to clear (and who knows how long this would take) this is not an option and we tog up in full waterproofs reminding ourselves that this is our **summer** holiday. A White Lion breakfast is best described as 'fuel', in fact the whole White Lion experience is somewhat charmless but we arrive at the port without mishap and sail to the front of the queue to be checked through ahead of cars. Rightly or wrongly, I rather enjoy this feeling! We are herded into a shed with other cyclists and foot passengers and quickly fall into that easy sort of conversational intimacy enjoyed by folk wearing luminous Lycra uniform. One foursome are also going to Paris, furthermore they have spent the previous evening in the company of none other than Donald Hirsch - to the cycling cognoscenti this man has plotted, in great detail, the whole route from Dieppe to Paris. They are using his route, as are we as far as Forges les Eaux. The crossing is uneventful and we are soon returning to the car deck ready to disembark.

As we roll off the ferry, I experience that great surge of excitement and anticipation; I just love the feeling of being at the start of another adventure. It feels so bold, pioneering even, and quite unlike the holidays of my first 54 years of my life!



Waiting to disembark at Dieppe

The exit from Dieppe is quick and painless and we're soon bowling along the Avenue Verte, literally a 'green' road which now runs from London to Paris and has been opened just in time for the Olympics. In a former life, it was a railway line - pretty straight and flat with a good surface. Now it is a traffic free route for anything on wheels - roller blades, skateboards, bikes, pushchairs, also joggers and walkers, the only 'dangers' being children wobbling erratically on bikes, dogs and hens pecking the verges. The downside is they are slightly sterile environments; naturally enough, there are no villages but the route is punctuated by former railway-crossing keepers' cottages which, in the main, have been given a new lease of life by new occupants.

By 6.00 pm we arrive at Manoir d'Aulage, a beautiful house with delightful hosts Françoise and Serge. We have a delicious dinner and spend a most happy evening in their company. Though they speak perfect english, Serge is a professor at Rouen University, we are anxious to speak french, indeed I love the opportunity to practice and receive tuition into the bargain. However, we cannot burn the candle at this end for too long, tomorrow we must be up and away in good time. We have 56 miles to conquer. It will be the longest day of our trip, not what I would have wanted but accommodation is not plentiful in northern France: options are somewhat limited.



***New owners of former railway buildings give free rein to their imagination!
Is this eclectic or just 'kitsch'?***

Manoir d'Aulage is as charming and gracious as the White Lion was not. In fact the whole day has started well with sun shining. The Manoir is set back from the Avenue Verte and we are back on it and bowling along with the wind in our wheels. Unfortunately, it is also directly 'on the nose'. If it could only be turned round, the day would be sublime, and especially welcome as it is quite a long day. The birds are singing, the wobbly children are not yet abroad, the whole experience is a tonic to the soul and, despite the miles to be done, we can still stop for the photo opportunities when they present themselves. We also catch up on the ferry foursome and exchange a brief greeting.



Lavoir on the Voie Verte, now a pretty place to cool off

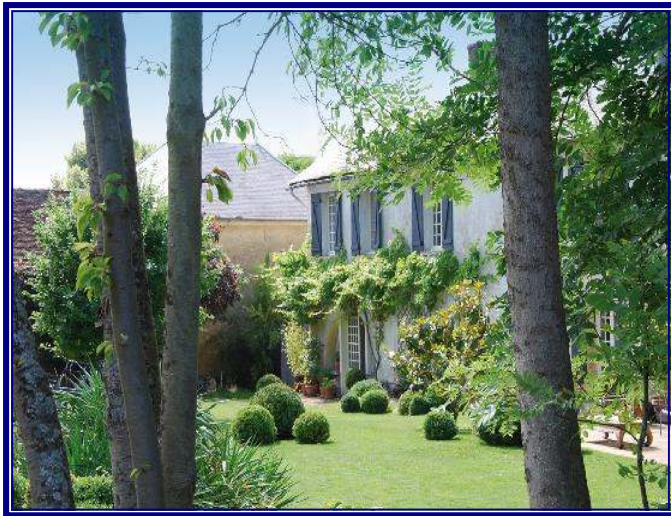
We stock up on lunch provisions at Forges les Eaux. Standard lunch procedure is to buy a baguette, cheese and/or charcuterie, two tomatoes and patisserie. We leave the Avenue Verte here to visit Lyons-la-Forêt, a very charming village, frequently used in film sets. Like most small french towns and villages in the afternoon, Lyons-la-Forêt is pretty sleepy, however, in two days this little place will 'morph' into the centre of the cycling universe as the Tour de France comes powering through. For a brief moment of glory the full panoply of the world's greatest cycle race will put Lyons-la-Forêt on the world stage, then, I imagine, it will slip back to obscurity: it would be fun to be here to see it. We check out the home of Maurice Ravel, he of Boléro fame and eat a double round of brioches aux amandes³, aka heaven on a

³ Almond brioches

plate. That is the beauty of a cycling holiday, being able to eat all those calories in the sure and certain knowledge that we will cycle them off!

The last two miles to our chambre d'hôte, one of Alastair Sawday's Special Places to Stay, is up the steepest of hills. It is a fully paid-up LSA, especially coming at the end of a long day. It nearly kills us but La Buissonnière turns out to be a delightful spot and worth the effort. Our hosts are again welcoming and Madame Bonnet provides us with a delicious curry vietnamese style. She is also kind enough to do our washing. These two acts are far above her normal brief, for which we are extremely grateful.

We fall into bed looking forward to tomorrow when we will spend the morning at Giverny, the home and garden of Gustave Monet before a 40 mile run to the outskirts of Paris.



La Buissonnière at Bus St Rémy

Day 4
Bus St Rémy → Orgeval via Giverny

Tuesday 3 July
44mls (71 kms)

We wake up to a milky sky but no rain so that's a bonus! Giverny, one of our 'must sees' on this trip, is about eight, mostly downhill, miles from La Buissonnière and we arrive shortly after opening but not before a coach has unloaded its passengers into the queue. We are wearing our Christchurch Cycling Club kit every day because it offers an easy opening to conversation. We have to disappoint several New Zealanders who joyfully think they have found some fellow countrymen. 'No, this is the original Christchurch', we say. In fact, Giverny seems to be full of Americans! and very quickly it is swarming with visitors which takes away some of the pleasure and makes it hard to imagine it as Monet would have seen it but they all want to see it as much as we do.
Note to self: Our next visit will be at the end of the day!

Even on this cloudy day, the garden is a fabulous riot of colour. How can that be? In England, sun loving plants need all available light, here they seem to flourish in the shadiest of corners.





Gardens of Giverny - Home of Gustave Monet from 1883 - 1926



We have agreed that we must leave Giverny at midday, there are still 40 miles to the outskirts of Paris and the last part will be during the rush hour. We do not want to get muddled up with impatient frenchmen hurrying home to watch the Tour.

The route will also be much more challenging but Damian and Google maps have it sorted. How things have changed from our first Loire trip! Then, we had John Higginson's modest little guide and IGN maps, this time we have 'virtually' cycled the route, into and out of Paris! While this is undoubtedly invaluable and may prove a life saver, it does take away some of the excitement.

The directions warn us of the long toil to Evequemont, no mistake there, it is particularly gruelling but it is swiftly followed by a long, sweeping,, exhilarating slalom down to the Seine at Treil sur Seine - three miles at 23 mph and not a turn of the pedals. We're travelling and I love it!

I had hoped to visit the house of Emile Zola en route. I feel anyone who could write such a dark and brooding novel as 'Thérèse Raquin' must be worth a look but his house is closed for major refurbishment. Another date for the next visit.

We are but a step from the Campanile at Villennes sur Seine but it's at the top of another LSA at the end of the day. Campanile is a great chain; formulaic it may be, but one knows exactly what one will find, everything will work and there will be a bath to soak the aching body. It is inextricably linked in my mind with the start of our many lovely french holidays.

We end the day by calling the Americans in Paris. Tomorrow, 4th July, American Independence Day, our careful planning is going to be really put to the test. We have negotiated many major french cities - Bordeaux, Toulouse, Nantes, Tours - Paris will be in a league of its own. We have 20 miles right to the iconic heart of the City of Light - the Eiffel Tower. It will be scary, of that I have no doubt, but please, don't let it rain on our parade!

Day 5

Villennes sur Seine → Eiffel Tower, Paris

Wednesday, 4 July

34 mls (47kms)

It's sunny and warm! Fanny and Chris Glydon ring us during breakfast to wish us luck - a lovely and unexpected surprise! Campanile provides its usual excellent buffet breakfast. I love it; I can eat for England AND France and know I will burn it all off. We are en route at 9.05 am, believing three hours is plenty of time to do 21 miles and still allow for photo ops and some margin of error. We are anxious not to let the side down, for ourselves or Nikki.

We have planned this section, we feel, **meticulously**. Amazingly, considering we are on the outskirts of Paris, we find ourselves on a deeply rutted farm track; there is no mistake and we are soon bowling along through the Forêt Marly le Roi, followed by the Bois de Boulogne. I begin to think this is all a walk in the park or at least a ride in the forest.



*In the Forêt
Marly le Roi*

However, with half an hour to go before rendez-vous, we are three quarters of an hour short and have to retrace some steps - thank heavens for mobile comms. Having recovered the route, we press on in ever more frenetic traffic. On the plus side, we are now using the cycle lanes, albeit shared with buses and taxis but nevertheless, wide. Traffic seems to flow around us like a shoal of fish in the sea. The 'gold standard' for our cycling progress is that I go ahead and shout out street names, directions and general landmarks, while Damian is behind with

the map. In the past, this modus operandi has proved itself pretty effective, assuming we do not get separated by lights or, indeed, anything else.

Unfortunately, an hour late, we turn into Avenue de la Bourdonnais just off Quai Branly and I see Shale standing out in the road waving, with Ellen, Lily and Sadie. Now I know how cyclists feel at the end of each stage of the Tour. For me, this will ever after be known as my 'Bradley Wiggins moment'.



***Our' Bradley Wiggins'
moment in
Avenue de la Bourdonnais***

Charlotte, Jeffery and Annie are already at Fontaine de Mars, a lunch stop favoured by the Obamas when they are in town. Ellen and Shale order champagne, we have lunch and ring Nikki. What a day, this is better than the Tour!

***Champagne lunch at
Fontaine de Mars.
America meets
Christchurch; we feel
seriously under-dressed***



After a delicious lunch we go our separate ways for the afternoon. Before finding Hotel Jeanne d'Arc, we feel we must take pictures in front of the Eiffel Tower, not as easy as one might imagine - there is no chance of it being just us and the tower. Just as there is no chance of getting the whole tower in. However we cannot miss the opportunity and that ironwork is pretty unmistakeable.



We have still to find Hotel Jeanne d'Arc, which is not far from Place de la Bastille. It will be another test of nerves but we can follow the pistes cyclables⁴ with designated signs for cyclists. There is no doubt, Paris has made it easy and there are plenty of cyclists about, weaving around with a boldness I can only marvel at. Place de la Bastille is a seemingly vast cobbled expanse with no lane markings, however, no one seems hell bent on cutting up two cyclists and with (my) heart thumping we reach the other side.

Hotel Jeanne d'Arc just off Rue St Antoine is best described as eclectic but we are right in the heart of the Marais; convenient for the Métro, and our bikes are safely stored in the luggage room. For the cyclist, with no other means of transport, secure storage has to be a prime consideration.

⁴ Cycle lanes

Day 6 Sightseeing in Paris

Thursday, 5 July

We may have a day off cycling but it will be no rest day. Before we left England, we learnt that Siân Cogan, one of Damian's cousins, would be playing, with her school jazz band, in the Tuileries. We had stayed with Siân's parents on our Far East holiday and it seemed a great idea to try to meet up in Paris. We had already planned to visit L'Orangerie situated at the Concorde end of the Tuileries to see some of Monet's water lily series, it all seemed to tie in well and also with our visit to Giverny.

No one seems to know anything about visiting english schools and we cannot spend our precious day in Paris looking for a phantom jazz concert; we resign ourselves to visiting the museum. L'Orangerie is a very 'manageable' museum, not even as big as one of the galleries of the Louvre, and the Water Lily series is just stupendous. It is impossible to express in words the effects which Monet achieved, certainly no picture postcard can ever do his paintings justice. We just have to store the image away in the memory bank. As we leave the museum, we hear the unmistakeable sound of jazz - at the base of the steps is the Monkton Combe jazz band. The sun is shining and they provide a happy lunch-time interlude.



By happy chance we manage to obtain entry to their evening concert at the British Embassy and get tickets for Ellen, Shale, Lily and Sadie too.

Unfortunately, what should have been the quintessential Pimms and strawberry experience on a little bit of UK territory in the Rue Faubourg St Honoré, somewhat falls apart. Some typically english heavy rain starts to fall and sitting out on the lawn is not an option, instead we huddle under the band's awning on the terrace. When it is time to leave, empty taxis prove to be rarer than hens' teeth and we have, eventually, to take the Métro to the restaurant. Nevertheless, we spend a happy evening with all the Americans at Joséphine Chez Dumont, where the confit de canard is to die for. This is their last evening before returning to America early tomorrow.



Two of the Water Lily series - Gustave Monet

Day 7
Paris → Barbizon

Friday, 6 July
42 miles (62kms)

Despite ominous forecasts, we wake to sun - bonus! If getting into Paris was scary, exiting is going to be no less scary, we shall need brains fully engaged. We're late setting off and know full well that the early part will be stop/start at many traffic lights but we're in the cycle lane and there is frequently a reassuring kerb stone set in the road to separate us from the rest of traffic. Nevertheless, no matter how one dresses it up there are heart stopping moments and the opposite side of Place de la Bastille looks a distant land to me. Damian advises 'just go with the flow'. Hah!

The route becomes a little easier as we leave the real bustle of Paris behind; we are grateful for the explicit instructions and I am grateful for Damian's reading of them. In fact, the route follows the cycle track alongside the river. The Seine is no Loire; at this point it is a fully paid-up, working river with barges plying their way up and down. At Vitry-sur-Seine there is a giant EDF power station being fed from a barge full of coal; there are no pretty sand banks with willows dipping their branches into the water - industry is the name of the game here. Once more, I am the early warning system, singing out street names and landmarks while Damian reads the map and shouts directions. It works more or less most of the time except when I am separated from Damian by two lanes of parisian drivers. It's difficult to get on the bike again in heavy traffic because our tail ends are so heavy - how can Damian navigate and manoeuvre his bike.

We are now in the countryside but, disappointingly, it is a far cry from that of the Loire; where are the pretty villages and interesting buildings? Perhaps this will change after Fontainebleau. Briefly, we find ourselves cycling up the slip road to a route nationale near Corbeil-Essonnes this is definitely not part of the plan and we retrace our steps very rapidly.

Barbizon, a village noted for its artists, is picturesque and we find our hotel quickly. Manoir St Herem is a tired relic of faded glory, we fear it will earn the doubtful accolade "Worst of Trip". In its favour there is a full-length bath with plenty of hot water. For a cyclist, these two features can redeem most situations.

We have our supper and hit the hay, knowing tomorrow will be an easy day, few miles in the saddle and most of the day spent visiting the Château of Fontainebleau.



SCENES OF THE SEINE:
mostly heavy industrial

*Crossing the Seine
at Ivry-sur-Seine
using the cycle track*

*Confluence of the Marne
and the Seine*



*A coal barge unloading
for the EDF power station*

*Whilst just beyond it,
this restaurant advertises itself as
'the ideal venue for your wedding,
baptism or first communion'!*



Day 8
Barbizon → Moiret sur Loing

Saturday, 7 July
13 mls (22 kms)

We are happy to shake the dust of Manoir St Herem off our heels confident that its position as “Worst of Trip” will not be usurped. We are looking forward to today. The visit to the Château of Fontainebleau is a ‘must see’ and we do not need to feel pressured by time constraints. We set off through the Forêt de Fontainebleau with strange limestone formations. It would be easy to imagine that France is all forests, of course, that is not the case. They are the legacy of french royalty who organised extensive hunting grounds for their amusement. Four centuries later they provide wonderful, cyclable routes on tracks easily the equal of some of our unclassified roads - think west Dorset for example.



***“Here’s looking at
you babe!”***

Thanks to the ‘honeypot’ attraction of the château, Fontainebleau is a prosperous town. The public spaces are well kept and flowery; commerce is thriving. The château, once the home of french royalty till they did away with the concept, is absolutely magnificent. François 1^{er} was truly a man who believed himself next to God. As the audio guide says, and I quote from memory “...François 1^{er} wanted to fill the whole world with his glory”. Nobody was going to accuse François 1^{er} of modesty!



***Fontainebleau -
a palace befitting a
king-god or god-king!
Resplendent inside and
out***



***One of a party of
five russians***



While walking round the gardens we see five cyclists arrive so heavily laden that our modest amount of luggage looks like some day trip. They are russian, none speak english and only one speaks some french, they have flown to Amsterdam and are cycling to Vienna! As on several previous occasions, this mighty endeavour puts our little expedition firmly in the 'cycling-for-softies' category! They may not speak english but one of them immediately recognises Damian's new Brooks' saddle and goes into a little swoon. We chat and exchange email and website details.

While we are working out our exit from Fontainebleau, we meet an american from Colorado. He has panniers mounted front **and** rear and, prior to arriving in France, has spent three weeks cycling in Iceland. I find it hard to understand why he should want to do that but, once again, it is easy to establish a friendly rapport with the instant passport of 'funny' shorts and the well-panniered bike. It is also one of the great pleasures of our cycling trips.

We are soon into Moret sur Loing and our hotel on the banks of the Loing. My heart bleeds for the russians who, after a hard day in the saddle, must erect their 'house' before going to bed. We have a superb confit de canard, quite my favourite supper and then a walk round the town. One advantage of cycling in France in July is the wonderfully long evenings, with the additional hour it is light till 10.00 pm. Moret is a delightful town and would seem to press all the right buttons if one was wanting to buy a house in France. It is bigger and more interesting than Barbizon and, joy of joys, still alive after 8.30 pm.

All in all a lovely day!

Day 9**Moret sur Loing → Villiers aux Corneilles****Sunday, 8 July****55 mls (91kms)**

Once again, it's a full waterproof jacket day and the idea of cycling to the source of the Seine and finding the grotto of the goddess Sequana loses some of its romanticism. We have 40 miles along a not particularly attractive stretch of river the only 'châteaux forts' are electricity stations of which there seem to be several. Our coffee stop is Montereau-Fault-Yonne at the confluence of the Seine and Yonne, it has an attractive bridge but very depressing bar/café.

***Napoleon
on the bridge at
Montereau-Fault-Yonne***



However, once we leave the town the wind is with us and we are bowling effortlessly along, achieving 24 mph. This is more like it, but sadly, the countryside is not attractive. Fields are vast prairies of cereal crops as well as something looking and smelling suspiciously like cannabis. Villages are fewer and further between which confirms my opinion that I would be temperamentally unsuited to cycling across America, as one of our cycling colleagues would have us do. If I find distances long here, in northern France, how much more daunting would it be to cycle in the American mid-west and it's just not France. In fact, we have made a considerable error in the mileage calculation and it is only thanks to a welcome tail-wind that we arrive on time at Château de mon Père where Jean-côme and Odile are charming and kindness itself. This time we eat supper en-famille which includes their two young children. I ask about the industrial scale 'cannabis' fields and learn that it is indeed hemp or chanvre and used for building insulation - so, no scandal there. Once again we get our kit washed, for which we feel lucky and grateful.



***“Oof!
Should I be smoking this?”***

Once upon a time Château de mon Père gave refuge to Joan of Arc but sometime between the 15th century and the 1990's it fell into total disrepair. From the pictures on the walls, our hosts have truly rescued the proverbial ‘tas de pierres’⁵ and are restoring it painstakingly. Jean-côme is also a champagne producer and we enjoy sharing a bottle as an apéritif. Now, this is the way to do it!

***Château de
mon Père***



⁵ Heap of stones

Day 10
Villiers aux Corneilles → Troyes

Monday, 9 July
32 mls (53kms)

Weather good and improving! After photos, we are off to Troyes. Odile tells us that a new Voie Verte is recently opened alongside the canal de la Haute Seine which will take us very nearly to our destination. We have spent a happy and instructive stay in their lovely home, neither speaks any english; french lessons are thrown in with B&B

I love this sort of day! A traffic free route, good surface, the wind behind us, once again we are flying at roughly 22 mph, just eating up the miles and stopping frequently. We make our lunch stop at the pétanque pitch in a suburb of Troyes and enjoy watching the chaps, not one less than 75 years old, arrive with their boules. One of the team has refined his game by fashioning a magnet on a string with which to retrieve his boule without the inconvenience of bending down - for these chaps, this is probably a real boon.

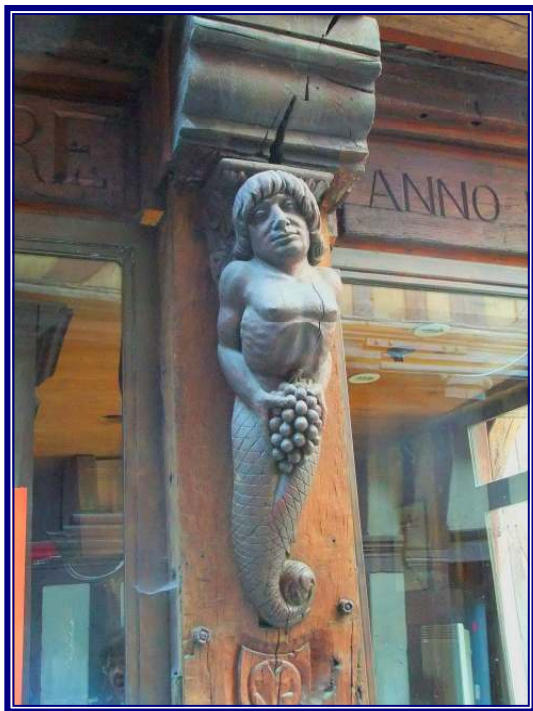
***A cunning plan to
retrieve ones boules***



Troyes is a delightful half timbered city, once a centre for the textile industry. The headquarters of the fashion giant, Lacoste, is the legacy of that industry. We find our hotel, Relais St Jean, which is very chic and has everything one could want including the full-length bath, our benchmark of excellence. Madame on reception suggests we store our bikes in the Relaxation Room. This seems rather hard on those guests wanting to relax and watch television but she assures us they won't know since the door will be closed - a case of bikes rule, OK!

We change and are out amongst the town quickly. It is full of gardens, quiet squares and a lovely refurbished open space with rill in front of the Préfecture. The main square in front of the Hôtel de Ville is undergoing a complete make-over, a process, it seems to me, much-beloved of french officialdom. I am thinking particularly of Gaillac in the Aveyron, Bordeaux and the granddaddy of them all, Paris around Les Halles.

We find a great restaurant for supper before heading back to the hotel. We have a modest distance to cover tomorrow to Mussy-sur-Seine.



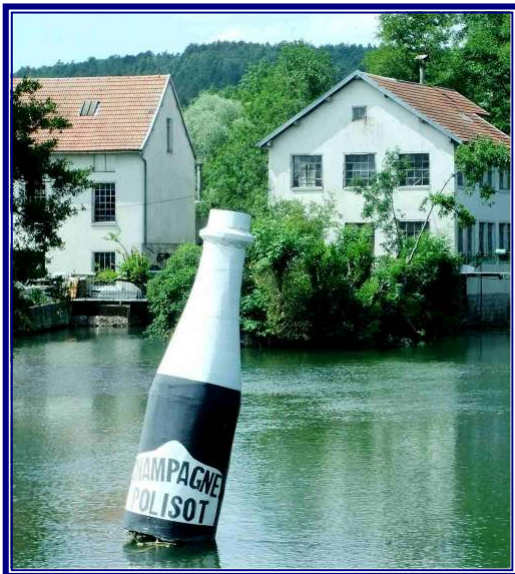
A well-satisfied siren!

Day 11
Troyes → Mussy sur Seine

Tuesday, 10 July
43 mls (69kms)

Weather bright, sunny. Relais St Jean has proved a great hotel in every respect, but we decide to start our day with breakfast out at a café. As family will know, this is a life-style leap for Damian who is uncompromisingly a porridge-and-toast-before-leaving-the-house sort of chap. He becomes reconstructed in France and it feels lovely to sit out in the early morning sun on the square with few people about.

After a few false starts we are on the road for Mussy. As if by magic, the wind has turned and where yesterday we were creaming along at 23 mph, today it is an effort to push 13 mph; this will certainly limit our progress. There is not much of the Seine to be seen here but we are still in champagne country - Troyes is also known as the cork of the champagne bottle: we see our first vines.

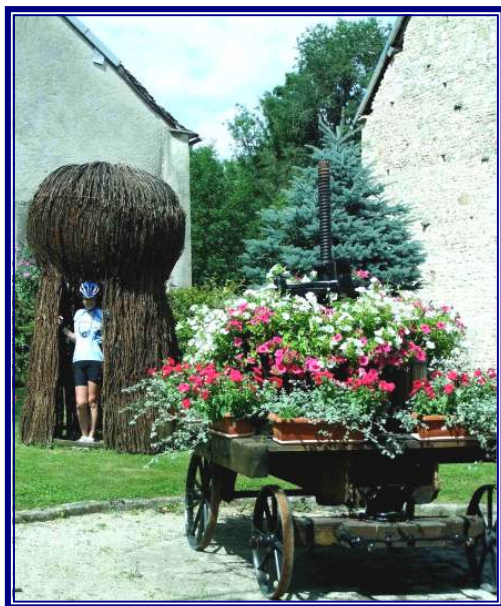


***A bit of a clue to the
local produce!***

Once again, the last part of the day's ride is an LSA to the crest above Les Riceys but the payback for every LSA is the sweeping run down - 3 kms of high speed freewheeling brings us into Mussy. I am reminded of some advice one of our B&Bs gave us - stronger folk than we have been forced to abandon similar enterprises due to lack of accommodation or revictualling opportunities. I can see how this could

happen, there are few hotels and many villages have lost their baker, butcher, general stores and bar tabacs. However, while you might struggle to find a baguette, you may find it easier to get your heart restarted; the new 'must-have' in any self-respecting village is a defibrillator! This seems sad, but only a sign of the times and no different from our own villages in England.

We find Hotel du Commerce where Jean-Michel and Valérie welcome us warmly unfortunately it is chef's night off but we eat well and Valérie kindly agrees to put our kit through the wash.



***The champagne theme continues
with this 'cork' made of willows at
Polisy***

Day 12

Mussy sur Seine → Baigneux-les-Juifs

Wednesday, 11 July

40 mls (66kms)

Weather: Brilliant sunshine. Hôtel du Commerce does what it says on the can. Before we leave Mussy we have a look at the church whose stained glass windows are 'worth the detour'. The whole church is encased inside and out with a skeleton of scaffolding and looks in a pretty bad way: in fact, it looks terminal and against this any building problem at Corpus Christi pales into insignificance.

We are now heading towards Châtillon-sur-Seine, home of The Vix Vase and possibly the last-chance saloon for lunchtime supplies. We must visit the museum home of this vase which, one feels, is spoken of in hushed tones. No ordinary vase, it is a burial urn dating from 500 BC and is truly immense. It was found buried in a field on the outskirts of Châtillon in 1953.



***Big enough for the final
journey of a princess?***

Unfortunately, when we leave the museum it is raining. The day should not be particularly long but the wind is 'on the nose' and we are now barely achieving 6 mph - where did cruising at 23 mph get to? There are now no shops or cafés in the villages and we must make a detour just to get some coffee. Local intelligence advises us that L'Hirondelle in St Marc-sur-Seine is the only possibility in these parts.

We guess the glory days for L'Hirondelle were sometime in the 50s/60s since when nobody has thought it necessary to change it. The walls are browned from decades of cigarette smoke, the furniture basic, the crone who serves us is at least in her 80s, but she is kind and sympathetic, her coffee hot and strong and she takes pity on us as she also manages to find some biscuits, her own private stock we think. As we leave we note sadly, that when Madame dies the café will probably die with her. As noted on previous occasions, only the Coiffure Mixte (Hairdresser) and the Pharmacie (Chemist) seem safe from the relentless march of the big chains in towns.

We have 13 kms to roll before at Baigneux-les-Juifs - literally the Baths of the Jews. La Bagnosienne is run by Lesley and John who have rescued the old butcher's shop and abattoir and reinvented it as a very lovely B&B. The other guests are a belgian couple; he extremely garrulous and she obsessively fretful about her grown-up son. Once again, we enjoy dinner and conversation before turning in. Tomorrow will be a Big Day as we finally reach the source of the Seine and the Grotto of the goddess Sequana.



Château de Duesme



The Seine is very narrow here

Day 13
Baigneux les Juifs → Dijon
via the source of the Seine

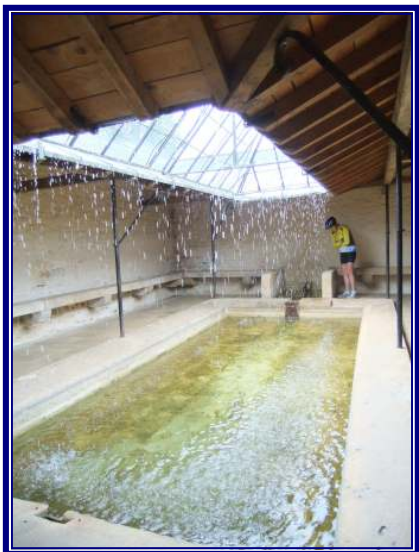
Thursday, 13 July
43 mls (69kms)

Weather: milky sky, cool. La Bagnossienne is utterly charming and Lesley and John kindness itself. As we leave, John offers to come and collect us should anything go wrong. We sincerely hope we do not need to take him up on his generous offer but how kind of him and way beyond the service of B&B. Today, will be the high point, literally, of the trip as we find the source of the Seine flowing to the Channel and the Ignon flowing to the Mediterranean.



***With Lesley and John at
La Bagnossienne***

Before leaving Baigneux we visit the lavoir, no ordinary lavoir but an 'impluvium'; the roof is open and sloping inwards to collect rain water. It has been restored but was in use up to the 80s. I struggle to imagine bringing my washing to the outskirts of town as recently as this. The village is named for the Jews who settled here but were subsequently banished by the dukes of Burgundy who burnt their houses down. How did they square this with their Christianity?



***The impluvium at
Baigneux les Juifs***

We press on to the source which, at 570m, is not a patch on the source of the Loire at 1495m. This will be a doddle! As in all our post-Paris days, we are in 'big sky' country with wide open landscapes and few villages - something is definitely missing and I feel a little disappointed.

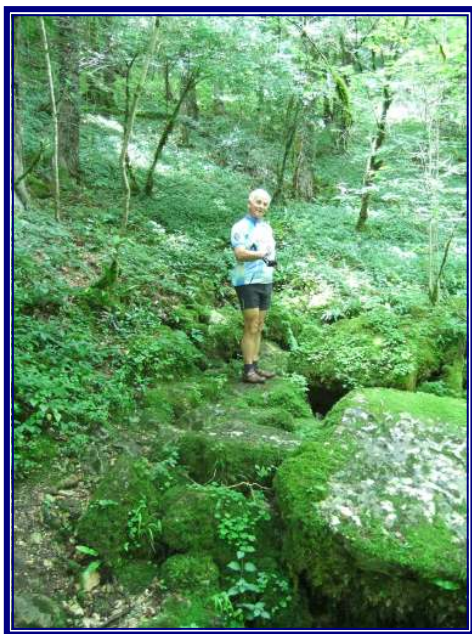
The source of the Seine is a very modest location, quite unlike the source of the Loire. Where is the bottled Seine water, the café-bar-restaurant and the kiosks for postcards and assorted memorabilia? There are just a few visitors and the grotto to the roman goddess, Sequana is situated in a little clearing. A forlorn wooden cabin opening afternoons, during summer months only, presumably serves all commercial needs. Have the french have missed a trick here?

***Source of the Seine -
Grotto of the
goddess Sequana***



If the source of the Seine is insignificant, the source of the Ignon is positively obscure, with the smallest of rustic signs announcing its existence. We descend down a narrow zig-zag path through damp woods, it is very green and everything is swathed in a mossy coat; the moisture is palpable; it reminds me of the setting of the Torc Waterfall, near Killarney.

We high tail it for Dijon, whizzing down from the plateau via miles of country roads before joining the towpath alongside the Canal de Bourgogne. This is familiar ground, we were here on 'Bimbling' and tonight we are in the Kyriad opposite the railway station; this will make for an easy get-away tomorrow.



'Is that it?' The source of the Ignon

Day 14
Dijon → Paris

Friday, 11 July
By train

Weather: bright(ish). Over the last seven years we have become masters at loading and unloading bikes and panniers onto trains and after three hours, we arrive at Paris, Bercy and steady rain adding hassle to getting back to Hotel Jeanne d'Arc. On the plus side, of all the Paris stations, Bercy is the closest to Bastille. On the minus side, the cobbled Place will now be even more fraught; in the canon of cycling hazards, wet cobbles come pretty near the top but I need not have worried, we are soon safely back in our hotel. It feels like a home-coming, Sophie on the desk is welcoming and delightful.



***Hôtel Jeanne d'Arc is a great find with
interesting art - perhaps a little
Daliesque?***



Before going out to supper, we crack open the bottle of Veuve Cliquot which Ellen and Shale gave us on their last night. The hotel has been keeping it chilled, along with some guide books which would just have been dead weight in the pannier. We feel very lucky! Supper is just a step from Jeanne d'Arc in the eponymous 'little french square' once again I cannot resist the confit de canard; I fear I shall start quacking soon.

Tomorrow: Fête Nationale, Bastille Day. We feel so lucky to be in Paris for this great celebration of La République, and a public holiday.

Day 15 Paris

Bastille Day, Saturday, 14 July

Weather: Despite an awful forecast, the weather is better than expected. We enjoy a brief lie-in but do not want to waste too much time or miss any of the action.

We decide to bike it again, which proves an inspired choice. Paris streets can never have been so clear, although the connecting roads through to the Champs Elysées have been closed since day-break. However, we can get into the Tuileries via the Louvre and catch the military flypast. We then hop back on the bikes to whizz round to the Madeleine to see some of the regiments parade. We are within touching distance of the Foreign Legion, the Parachute regiment, the Chasseurs Alpins, with their extremely floppy berets, submariners, the mounted Republican Guard - all of military life was there, followed by a selection of french military hardware and representations from the emergency services. It is exciting; it seems all of Paris is crammed on the pavements to witness this great spectacle of national pride.



During lunch a reporter, in town to cover the parade, suggests the best view of the Eiffel Tower is from the Trocadéro. We set off and find a detachment of armoured cars and some more of the Floppy Beret Brigade standing around in a 'meet the public' exercise. From Bovington to Paris little boys of all ages cannot resist climbing in/on tanks. Returning, we cross the Seine at the Pont de l'Alma forever associated with the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. Our own Tour de Paris culminates in a ride down the Champs Elysées past the great

names of haute couture, Fendi, Ferragamo, Givenchy, YSL, Christian Louboutin and many more, to Place de la Concorde. I feel exhilarated!

Quatorze juillet finishes with a huge firework display. Despite being some distance from the Eiffel Tower, we have a fine view. We eventually fall into bed at 1.00 am, happy in the knowledge that we have another day in Paris tomorrow.



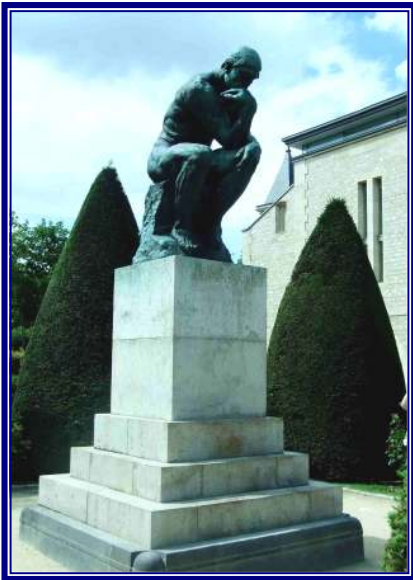
***The Spahis
(originally north african)
light cavalry***



***Chasseurs Alpains -
the Extremely Floppy Beret
Brigade. The beret is known
as 'la tarte'***

We relish our (slightly) extended lie-in after the night before but also look forward to another day of relative car-free cycling. Sunday is a great day to venture out on bikes, particularly for a novice; many side streets are closed to motor traffic, one can then connect safely to the main thoroughfares using the pistes cyclables.

Today we're visiting the Musée Rodin. I had no idea just how much this sculptor had achieved during his life, my knowledge did not extend much beyond *The Thinker* and *The Kiss*. The museum is very 'do-able'. Unfortunately, it starts raining but it is reasonably short lived.



The Thinker

We finish the day with more sightseeing round St Germain des Prés; all easily accomplished with bikes. Were we not to have our own, the Paris Velib scheme is popular, seems efficient and easy to operate and there are many 'ranks'. Models of pared down economy these bikes are not: rather they are solid, robust and well equipped with a basket, lights and locks. You can take from one location and return to another. We see all sorts of men and women using them, they are definitely not the preserve of students. I wonder how they compare with Boris's Bikes?



A Velib bike rank. These are not the 'coolest' of cycling machines but popular and efficient

Day 17
Paris → Maule

Monday, 16 July
31 mls (49kms)

Weather: Sunny. As it turns out, today is a day from hell! However, it starts well enough and we think we can afford to spend the morning in Paris as we only have just over 30 miles to push in the afternoon. In my bones, I feel this could be our undoing but nevertheless, am happy to have time to walk round Les Halles and the Pompidou centre. We're on bikes again: I'm really getting the hang of this city and am coming to the opinion that cycling is the best way to really appreciate this city.

The Les Halles area is undergoing a huge restructuring. In the recent past it was the wholesale fruit market before that was relocated to Rungis. Apparently, the first redevelopment was not universally liked and it is now being 're-redeveloped'. It is causing an immense upheaval and will not be finished before 2014 - I hope it is all worth it.

***The Stravinsky Fountain
by Jean Tinguely.
We visited another of
his in Château Chinon
whilst 'Bimbling'***



The Pompidou Centre

We reluctantly head back to the hotel to saddle up. After three days without panniers, the weight, briefly, makes us feel unstable. We're soon round Place de la Concorde, over the Seine and out the same way we came in nearly two weeks ago.



***'Louis XIV, I presume'
The Pont Alexandre***

***Manhandling
bikes over the
Seine via the
Eiffel Aquaduct***



The way out of Paris is not easy, we cross the Seine on a aquaduct also built by Gustave Eiffel and still supplying Paris with water today. We become seriously unstuck in Parc St Cloud, and lose a lot of time however, this is only a 'taster' for the difficulties round Versailles. I begin to feel desperate, it is getting late, we have many miles to cover before our B&B at Maule and we can see no safe way to get into the forest of Mâry le Roi until I see a cyclist coming towards us. This angel

of mercy takes us under his wing, inviting us to follow him. This is music to my ears and, after a couple of miles, he points us in the direction of the forest. Never was I more grateful for such kindness. I had begun to think I would be condemned to cycle round Roquencourt for eternity.

We fall into our B&B at 8.00 pm, three hours later than what I consider to be the latest comfortable arrival time. It has taken us seven hours to do 31 miles - poor progress by any standard.

Pierre and Michelle are kindness itself especially as they have waited for their own supper. We spend a happy evening with french lessons added. What a day - not one to be repeated!

Day 18
Maule → Cailly-sur-Eure

Tuesday, 17 July
43 mls (72kms)

Weather: cool, sunny, WINDY! We get away from Maule in fair time. My mission today is to find some pétards for Alastair. Thirty years ago Tim and I had a similar quest, an episode which went down in the annals of family history as the occasion when, on a return journey through Chartres, Nikki and Damian went to admire the stained glass windows of the cathedral while Tim and I searched for french fireworks. It was so long ago, I cannot even remember if we were successful! I now want to find some for Jo and Tim's son, there is nice symmetry to this exercise. When I eventually buy them they're heavy and seem to add significantly and disproportionately to my load.

Once again the wind is on the nose. How is it that in 17 days of cycling we've had a head wind for all but **two** days and we're now cycling in the opposite direction - Murphy is obviously alive and well! Combined with many hills, progress is slow. However, the countryside has changed. I am happy to note villages along the Eure seem much more prosperous than those along the Seine east of Paris. Here, villages have retained a good selection of shops and bars.



***Two-sided sundial on the
church at Fains***



***An immaculately
kept Mairie at
Fontaine-sous-Jouy***

Auberge les Deux Sapins is a Logis de France; we are confident our meal will be good. Our room is 'tired' but I am able to sweet talk Madame to let us wash kit, always worth several 'brownie' points.

Before supper we take a quick walk round the village. It is not large but does have a bar-tabac, dating, we guess, from a similar age to L'Hirondelle at St Marc-sur-Seine. There are a few locals putting the world to rights and we fall into conversation with a chap, originally from the Dordogne; he is mystified that any self-respecting englishman can be holidaying in northern France, rather than the beautiful Dordogne. Once they have given us the once-over, and with a refreshing disdain for rules, mine host, our friend and the other two occupants light up cigarettes. I am neither offended nor dismayed, but fancy the Health & Safety 'mafia' would not be so relaxed.

We would like to stay talking and discover what our friend thinks of François Hollande but it's late-ish and we must get into the dining room. Reluctantly, we leave, to enjoy a very acceptable meal supervised by an extremely supercilious young woman "maître d'".

Day 19

Cailly sur Eure → Pont Audemer

Tuesday, 18 July

47 mls (78kms)

Note to self: Never, ever visit Brosville on a bike; the only way out is seriously up!

We leave Cailly in reasonable time - in truth, we have never once managed a 'good' start but we are on holiday. We are immediately into a 'get-off-and-push' hill followed by an equally steep descent. Progress is slow but as nothing until a wonderful long, flying descent into Brosville followed by an LSA of massif proportions. The **only** way up is on foot and we find we have taken three hours to do 12 miles. At this rate we will not arrive in Pont Audemer before 8.00 pm. Happily, it does improve and we pick up a Voie Verte and make up much time, 4 mph becomes 16 mph and the miles are being gobbled up, once again we are achieving on a bike, relatively, what a car would achieve on a motor way.

Le Neubourg, half way along the VV is a busy, delightful town enlivened by the market. Unfortunately, it is folding up but not before we buy the Best Baguette of Trip and the juiciest peaches. Once again, this town seems to press all the right buttons as a place to buy a house. Tempting as it is to sit at a pavement table, bathed in sun, watching the world go by, we must press on.



***Another immaculate
Hotel de Ville.
At Neubourg, a pretty
pink and white
confection***

Slightly incongruously, as we are bowling along, we see a nun in wimple and full habit sitting at a picnic table in earnest conversation with a young woman - is she hearing the woman's confession? Who knows, I am reminded of the jogging nun on our Loire trip.

We get back onto the Voie Verte and go full tilt, stopping only at Le Bec Hellouin. Here we find an ancient abbey with long-standing ecclesiastical connections to Canterbury and a delightful 'honey pot' village - think Broadway or Castle Combe - now twinned with Canterbury.



**Entrance to the Abbey
at Le Bec-Hellouin,
twinned with Canterbury**

**Plaque detailing the close ties
with Canterbury.
Over the centuries, this abbey has
sent archbishops, bishops and
abbots to England**

We are now cycling along the pretty valley of the Risle, on the last leg to Pont Audemer. We are hardly surprised to find the last mile is the obligatory LSA to Jeanne and Paul's home high above Pont Audemer.



Pont Audemer is twinned with Ringwood and a french member of the Twinning Association has put us in touch with the Maddens who also cycle. We spend another happy evening hearing about their trip from Pont Audemer to Hungary 2,000 kms and camping on the way. Frankly, and not for the first time, this makes our venture look like a Sunday school outing.

Day 20
Pont Audemer → Bournemouth
The Day of The Bridge

Wednesday, 19 July
26 mls (42kms)

Today, which started so well, 'morphed' into Another Day from Hell and on reflection, we feel lucky to be here to tell the tale!

We plan to leave Pont Audemer at 11.00 am so that we can have a quick look at the town with Jeanne and Paul. It is not a long ride to Le Havre but we want time to admire the view from the wonderful Pont de Normandie as well as allow for a margin of error. In Pont Audemer I particularly want to find the sign, which surely must exist at some entrance to the town, announcing that the Pont Audemer is twinned with 'Ringwood, Royaume Uni'. This would be a great picture for the record. Jeanne seems to know most of Pont Audemer including a former mayor but none can help. Indeed, the former mayor's response is brief and robust 'I'm not the mayor now - not my part of ship - au'voir!' We give up!



***With Jeanne and Paul
before leaving
Pont Audemer***

We bid farewell on the dot of 11.00 a.m. and feel rather smug at this tour de force - on the last day - of timekeeping. We are using the Vallée de la Risle cycle route again past lovely normandy cottages - all 'chaume et colombage'⁶ and then catch our first glimpse of The Bridge. It is a wonderful, soaring structure, the latest crossing over the Seine built in 2004. I feel a frisson of excitement, and terror, that I am going to cross it; nevertheless, I have been looking forward to it. Unfortunately, as we approach the 'foothills' of the bridge we find, due to works, that it is closed to cyclists, though, importantly, not pedestrians. What to do NOW?

⁶ Thatch and timbering



Damian, nothing daunted, wants to push on. I, on the other hand fear that we shall either have to get a taxi or risk being arrested on entry to the bridge, or worse, as we leave. We decide to become bicycle-pushing pedestrians; we press on up, up, up on the path, buffeted by high winds. In fact, walking is possibly the more comfortable option; pedestrians are separated by a kerb set in the carriageway, whilst cyclists have only a painted line.

Closure is due to resurfacing on the carriageway leaving Le Havre and all traffic is using the carriageway into the port. Amazingly, and with a wonderful gallic disregard of rules, we see on the 'closed' carriageway a family of cyclists, dad, followed by youngster of about nine, followed by mum towing a trailer containing possibly a child or, given this is France, a dog. They do not have to contend with juggernauts tanking to the port, they have their side completely to themselves, I am hugely envious!



Mid-way point on the Pont de Normandie

This bridge is 1.5 mls long and I am still afraid the gendarmes will be at the other side waiting to arrest us. To my great relief, there is no posse of french policemen but the ordeal is not yet over. There are further repairs on the walk way over the bridge and the pedestrian path is blocked, we will either have to retrace our steps about quarter of a mile or scramble down a rose planted embankment. We opt for the embankment but naturally must unhook the panniers and lift the bikes over the roses for fear of puncturing the tyres. To my astonishment, we are past the toll booths and on the road again and no sound of wailing sirens following us.

We pick up the cycle track and all seems plain sailing until this runs out; we are now truly dicing with death particularly at the 'pinch' points. Not only is Le Havre the main Channel port for commercial traffic but there is an oil refinery and cement works as well. We are too old for this game; on the Richter scale of scary, it is off the top and I wonder if my number is up. However, we do arrive at the ferry port, mercifully, with about 10 minutes to spare, just time to eat some lunch before embarking. We resolve to write to the mayor of Le Havre and suggest some improvements to make the experience more cycle friendly.

We have cycled 612 miles and I salute my navigator who has negotiated two exits from Paris, east and west and 1.5 entries (the half because we arrived at Bercy on the train!).

The crossing is uneventful and we arrive in Portsmouth at 10.30 pm, a good time, all is pretty quiet. The car is still there, with wing mirrors and wheels and it starts first time. We are home in Bournemouth by 11.30 pm after another great adventure. Will there be another - there's the question!?



A lovely normandy cottage in the valley of the Risle



Some of the lovely wild flowers of northern France