

## Brittany August 2010

*This is the second time Ryders have been to Brittany – we had a week there on the motorbike in 2008. This was a visit with, and organised by, Elaine's family....*

Brittany is that bit of France that sticks out to the west about half way down. Being quite close to Britain – and actually sharing what is in effect the same name (Bretagne as opposed to Grande Bretagne) – it is quite familiar to the British. Some know it for the underlying granite that gives it such a kinship, in matters geological and in all-the-things-that-spring-from-Geology – to our South West Peninsula, others for its remarkable standing stones (menhirs) and other prehistoric monuments raised by mysterious people who could apparently hump around very large rocks with the greatest of ease. A smaller minority think of it as the home of a certain Ms Spears.

Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> August: Getting there... **Mice of Peace and Mice of Life.**

Takes a long time, at least three and a half days on the train, although in the false reality in which we live this was compressed into fourteen or so clock hours. Long periods of rump-mortifying inactivity interspersed with purgatorial labours dragging our trundlecases through dank tunnels beneath thronged metropolii. Surfaced briefly in Paris, at the foot of an immense modern skyscraper (Tour de Montparnasse); PFR queued for half an hour to ascend in quest of an overview of the city, but time ran out, and it would have been 11 euros anyway. Then trundled down an endless platform to board the TGV train, which rockets at exocet speeds west out of Paris (but it still takes 3 hours 20 minutes, so it must be a really long way) into Brittany. Made conversation with a friendly French family, but PFR confused them by explaining that Megan and Lindsay were town mice, but he and Elaine country mice.... but 'de ville' came out as 'de vie' and 'de pays' as 'de la paix' so we were 'mice of life' and 'mice of peace'. Still, not bad things to be, all things considered. They looked confused. At last disembarked at St Brieuc. Elaine had been lax about relaying our arrival time so poor Graham ended up driving the 30 km from Le Manoir twice. Arrived to spagbol; Walkers had bought vin in Paris as some members of the family are Methodistical and we worried that they may have omitted to make this essential provision.

Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> August. **Ou sommes nous?** Le Manoir is (or was) in effect the manor house of the hamlet of Kernogan, in the parish of Allineuc. The house itself had lain in ruins (since the Revolution) until rebuilt (retaining just the original gable ends) twenty years or so ago, with new machine-cut granite dressings. It is a rectangular block of one-and-a-half storeys (the upper rooms have gabled dormers that break the eaves) whilst on the south is a projecting square porch/tower with a round-arched doorway and a steep pyramidal roof. It is not clear whether this is on old foundations or not, but is very typical of the local style. These 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century manoirs, some with round, some with square towers (containing the main stair) are a familiar house type at this period in lowland Scotland as well. The ground floor is one huge living room, except for a kitchen at the end; there is a terrace with built-in barbecue and a swimming pool; all very posh; very good woodwork inside (nowy-headed doors everywhere), all recent. Brian and Jacqueline, the present owners, hail from Chesterfield and are old friends of Elaine's family; they live in a small house attached to the main one, whilst on the north of the courtyard are a range of three gites – holiday flats – formed out of old farm buildings. We stay in the one at the east end; it is called 'Julie' and

has upper-floor rooms reached by an external stair and an old round-arched chamfered doorway which seems the only genuinely ancient architectural feature of the whole complex – although one jamb stone has sockets for what look like window bars, so it may be made up of old material. The roof trusses are recent but use traditional timber pegging. Clean, comfortable but totally without sound-proofing, so the merest whisper (or other human sonic emanation) in one room is relayed, seemingly amplified, in all the others; one result is acute self-consciousness during nocturnal loo visits



*Kernogan looking west; Julie-the-gite with her round-arched doorway on the left, chapel on the right*

On Sunday morning a large part of the family went early to an English-speaking Christian Fellowship some distance away, in Brian's minibus, we stayed along with heretical/ backsliding element<sup>1</sup>. Elaine only rose after (a) tea (b) hot pain au chocolat and (c) freshly-brewed coffee, were brought to her. First worked out where we are. Kernogan is a hamlet of about a dozen houses. Everything is built of metamorphic-looking rubble; most buildings do not have any quoins. Dressed stone where it exists looks to be granite, with big whitish phenocrysts. Just over the road is a little disused chapel, just a box with its

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<sup>11</sup> PFR afterwards regretted not going; the group, of English-speaking evangelicals, meet – by invitation of the local RC bishop – in a historic village chapel, which they are repairing and maintaining; maybe messy boundaries, but is all within the one Church...

eastern angles chamfered, probably 18<sup>th</sup> century. Houses have 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century dates; met two friendly neighbours, one with a litter of toe-nibbling Boxer pups.

After a French-style lunch of bread, cheese and sliced meat, took the local walk – around the lake, which is actually a reservoir. 5 km of amiable amble, but unfortunately everyone else in the area had decided to do exactly the same thing, so one was forever meeting caterpillars of fellow hikers, and it was forever ‘bonjour’ ‘bonjour’ ‘bonjour’ or sometimes ‘merci’ when you stand aside to let them past. One longed for some other response – perhaps a liturgical ‘et aussi avec vous’ or even a diabolic ‘MAL APRES MIDI’, just for variety. And it was very much ‘a walk in the park’ that could have been just anywhere in a temperate latitude; a winding waterside path through deciduous woodland, an artificial ‘beach’ where sand had been put down, lots of fisherman and brightly-coloured little boats, a pizza parlour advertising itself as the venue for a free rock concert this evening (posters show ‘Onyx’ to be four mean and moody-looking guys; was this to be the zenith of their careers?). Thought we were out in the sticks but this was suburban recreation; nothing Bretonic or even specifically French. And a lot of the ‘bonjours’ were delivered with a suspiciously English accent.

Returned to doze to the jolly background din of most of the party frolicking in the pool. Meanwhile I want a westerly gale, granite cliffs, lighthouses, menhirs, parish closes, Celtic saints.... Where is the real Brittany?

### **Monday 9<sup>th</sup> August. Not the real Brittany either.**

The day began quite well; run into St Brieuc to collect our hire car, a Peugeot 206 diesel, plugged in the new Satnav and off we went north. First stop Lanleff and its ‘Temple’, a ruined round church – in use until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when a Gothic extension was dismantled and its materials used to build a new church nearby, leaving the old one a ruin. It is a ‘Templar’ church very like those of a well-known English group (London, Cambridge, Ludlow Castle etc) with a round nave of twelve bays, with most of its aisle wall standing, and a pair of shallow apses to the east. Quite primitive carving, now badly worn, to its granite capitals, so perhaps c1100, but a very recognisable type of building. So why do we have a free guide leaflet opining ‘opinions differ as to its exact `date and purpose’ and quoting ‘experts’ (local historians from 1805 and 1827!) who thought it might be a Druidic temple to the Sun, ending with one of them saying that it bears no resemblance at all to Templar churches – which is unmitigated rubbish. No, this is the New Age, when your truth is as good as my truth, friend, the more obscure and romantic the better....

Then on to Pontrieux and had lunch in a very pretty small town, with some fine framed houses, and flowers everywhere. More flowers a few miles west at Runan, which had a parish close (of which more later) – which here included, in addition to a rather lovely Gothic church, an ossuary built onto the west end of the south aisle and a preaching cross. Then north to the coast and Ploumenach, and from the point of view of PFR, the day went downhill. OK the coast itself is pretty – everywhere Dartmoor-like piles of granite boulders, but also everywhere posh houses and tourist-jammed settlements – just too many people, the beaches heaving with sweltering human flesh, the shops jammed with tourist tat, every bay packed out with yachts. It was all pretty horrible, unless one wished to lounge and fry, or join

in mass wallowing exercises. PFR retreated into the cool and shade of a little late medieval chapel, in the company of a series of elderly vernacular statues including a wooden St Sebastian who managed to look both cherubic and aggrieved at the same time, either because he had been shot full of arrows or because, over the years, all but two of them had either dropped out or been removed as souvenirs. Tourists keep entering the building, but on seeing someone already there, whispered (or sniggered) and soon departed again; brief curiosity followed by embarrassment. Escape from the coast proved difficult; frustrated in an attempt to visit a far more interesting old church at Perros-Guirec, we shuffled and crawled south through tripper jams. Still, it must have been a nice place once.

## Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> August. **Mariolatry, Chocolate and Jerks**

Dawn dank and dripping, came late. No enthusiasm for long trips, so instead to Quintin, about ten miles to the north, a medieval town which was having a market; as usual with such events, the problem is to restrain PFR from buying live rabbits. Most of the stalls in the streets were to do with food; we can record sounds and images, but here it is the smells one wishes to retain – in this modern age, why have the Japanese not invented something to do it? There are a few good 16<sup>th</sup> century houses with timber-framed fronts and thick stone side walls – perhaps, as in Newcastle, this was a constructional stipulation, to prevent the spread of fires. Apart from one battered gateway there was very little medieval on view; the Chateau is all 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the Basilica mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and heavily into Marian Devotion/Mariolatry, with a tatty piece of what claims to be the Blessed Virgin's shawl displayed on the altar. Quite a lot of elderly ladies were lighting candles; all around the doorway were white tiles all expressing individual's thanks to the Virgin for her assistance on sundry matters. All a bit hard for a Protestant to cope with, so went into a chocolate shop and indulged in unnecessary consumption of confectionery.

Back to Le Manoir for lunch, then to Chateau de la Hunaudaye. Elaine and I had seen the exterior of this impressive ruined fortress in 2008 when biking round Brittany, but it is only actually open in the two holiday months of July and August. Five big towers, all of which you can go up, but the ranges between are ruinous and the way the ruin is handled a bit disappointing. French ruins are usually well displayed, and the interpretative material not dumbed down as often happens in Britain – however here a great deal was made of ghosts and Gothic novels, with fake tombstones and one tower festooned with polypropylene twine, perhaps meant to resemble spiders' webs but in fact resembled only polypropylene twine, and just looked silly. But the English-language guidebook, as often, made it all worthwhile; it really did pretty well, then concluded with sentence 'the beautiful ruins characterise the jerks in French history'...

Then into Laballe, first to the church of St Martin – formerly monastic but showing little sign of it, although it was closed for the inevitable travaux, so we moved on to the Eglise Collegiale, which was much more rewarding – a towering part-Romanesque part-Gothic structure on a hilltop site, its delights including an elaborate 12<sup>th</sup> north door and a beautiful late medieval timber loft over the south choir chapel with exquisite Flamboyant Gothic traceried panelling, a bit like that lost in the Brancepeth fire. Megan's camera coped better than mine in recording its details.

Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> August. **Westwards and lots to see**

Only senior Ryders. West to Corlay (noting it had a ruined chateau, for future reference) then north up the twisty D767 and a brief westward diversion on byroads to find the Abbaye de Coemalouen (or 'Koad Malouen' – 'God's Goodness'), only signposted locally but turning out to be an extensive ruin, partly conserved and open free of charge. It was a Cistercian houses, founded in 1142 – but entirely rebuilt in 1776, just in time for the Revolution to bring down the curtain on monastic life here. The Classical western facade of the west range is intact, as is the shell of the aisleless cruciform church, which has an unusually small nave shorter than the cloister; the only place older walling looks to survive is on the north of the cloister, which may represent the south wall of the medieval nave, with traces of both processional doors. In the north transept lie several medieval monuments, both effigies and cross slabs.

Then north to Guingamp, letting the Satnav take us to Rue l'Abbaye and the Abbaye St-Croix, where the Abbot's House is intact and in use for functions, with to the south-east of it the ruins of the church. No-one around, bar an Alsatian and a Rottweiler which came and did their barking bit, decided we were harmless, and thereupon wagged and ignored us. The church is a shell, overgrown inside, with a later building built across the west end of its nave, but the crossing has some good later C12 detail and the eastern arm the usual polygonal apse.

### **Parish Closes**

Brittany is famous for its enclos paroissiales (parish closes), which dramatically underline the divergence of British and Bretonic History which took place at the end of the Middle Ages. Basically, we had a Reformation, they didn't. Our old churches are usually medieval, restored or rebuilt in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the later 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries we built little, and what we did was often so scruffy, or judged in bad taste, that it was later restored away. We had Puritians; they did not like images, and even broke down simple crosses as superstitious symbols. In Brittany it was very different; partly as a conscious reaction to what was happening across Le Manche ('the Counter Reformation') even the churches of small parishes went in for extravagant building and display, with a riot of figure sculpture in both stone and wood. Granite is a hard material to work, but once worked it stays worked. A cluster of villages, mostly in eastern Finistere (the westernmost province) have parish closes; in addition to the churches themselves, within which every timber is carved and painted and huge altar pieces dominate, there are triumphal arches at entrance to the churchyard, Calvaries – which depict not only the Crucifixion (with all three crosses) but play out the whole Passion story throwing in other parts of the Gospel narrative and sometimes with odd Breton legend as well. Typically the figures are about half life size, and in the garb of the period (later 16<sup>th</sup> to early 18<sup>th</sup> century) in which they were carved. The other usual components are Mortuary Chapels (often Flamboyant Gothic-turning-Baroque) in which little crypts containing near-life-sized statuary depicting the Entombment are surmounted by altars with reredos depicting the Resurrection, and Ossuaries (bone stores), little pent-roofed structures with open arcaded sides, usually at the foot of the west tower. Church and parish close were clearly a source of intense local pride; belfries, tower and spires are varied and elaborate. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, villages whose peasants revolted were punished by having theirs pulled down. Two of the finest parish closes, St-Thegonnec and Guimiliau - are only a few km apart, and it is said intercommunal rivalry spurred their

sculptors and kept hammers and chisels flying. The innate English protestant struggles with all this exuberance, the flights of fleshy cherubs, the inevitable pincushion-of-arrows St Sebastian, but it is nevertheless very impressive, and arguably largely a very visual telling-of-the-story. One recalls a cartoon of John Calvin we saw a couple of months ago in a Geneva street 'Here is the Bible; I took out the pictures'. Of course it is not just the Bible; there are saints so local that only the village knows about them. Most came across the sea from Britain (and especially Ireland) to bring pinpoints of light to the Dark Ages. Some of the tales about them sound a little apocryphal; St Thegonnec, for instance, had the donkey that pulled his cart eaten by wolves. He had a word with the wolves; suitably penitent, they allowed themselves to be harnessed and there upon pulled his cart. It must be true, the whole story is several times carved in wood and stone in and around the church dedicated to in and around the church of the village which perpetuates his name.

There is a whole cluster of parish closes in eastern Finistere, roughly centered around Morlaix; today we visited three (St-Thegonnec, Lampaul-Guimiliau and later on Pleyben)



*Lampaul-Guimiliau, the Parish Close looking west, Calvary (a relatively small and simple example) in the foreground, mortuary chapel and triumphal entry arch beyond*

Our furthest west was reached at Illiz Koz, on the coast north of Brest, a modern city defended by roads with a vast multiplicity of roundabouts. Illiz Koz takes some finding; the church and priest's house were only disinterred from the sand dunes which buried them (in the 1700s) a couple of decades ago. What attracted us (ie PFR) here was a brief note in the guidebook about ancient tombstones carved with emblems. The whole slab-paved graveyard has been disinterred, along with the surviving lower courses of the church. About fifteen of the recumbent granite slabs have emblems, a couple of swords, gloves (or severed hands?), a boat, a few chalices (with names) for the priests. It is all quite well laid out (a little site museum and a 3 euro entry) and there are boards with drawings directing one to the carved slabs – but (sorry, but in honesty there has to be a but) the drawings are such rubbish that it is hard to link them

to the individual stones. There is a guide leaflet which relates a local legend relating to the burial of the church and village by the sand dunes; gloriously incomprehensible (at least in the English version) it seems to entail bored teenagers ('who could not go to McDonalds') persuading an innocent old priest to baptise a 'devil cat' which got so upset that it called down a sandstorm. Or something like that.

Whilst waiting for the Illiz Koz site to open (it was afternoons only, ie 1430-1730) we had walk on the coast, by a Chapel of St Michel with megalithic granite quoins and a raised surround to its west doorway which in Ireland would have put it into the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century, but seems to have been built in 1707 by a local chap famous for drawing maps and charts, including a 'how to get to heaven' one very like the 'Broad and Narrow Ways' 19<sup>th</sup> century (Protestant) one now familiar as a poster in England. People were shown divided into the rich and poor, with roads leading up to Heaven at the top, but with Hell and Purgatory as two separate enclosures just beneath; it was very like a game of bagatelle, you aim at the high-scoring pocket at the of the board but might well drop into another. Interestingly, it looked as if more of the poor than the rich were getting home. The coast here is real Brittany, granite crags, headlands with dolmens, and lighthouses beyond lighthouses on the horizon.

The day was passing faster than expected, as we headed south east again, rounding Brest, to one more splendid parish close at Pleyben (along with afternoon coffee and a tart tatin avec two spoons), then fast road for another 70 km east to the Abbaye de Bon Repos, a Cistercian house. As at Coemalouen the cloister buildings had been rebuilt late in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but here the medieval church had been retained although it is down to its footings except for the south transept and south nave wall. The cloister and its buildings are being restored and have some informative displays; PFR especially delighted in what is identified as the grave slab of a medieval architect's grave slab with a strange stylised cross accompanied by emblems including a pair of compasses, a square and what is said to be a spirit level.

Back to Le Manoir for tea, then out again, back to Bon Repos once more for a Son et Lumiere. In our seats by 21.00, although performance was 22.30 until 00.30, re-enacting the period from the Stone Age to the present day. The French do these things well. Cast of 400, live pack of hounds in full cry, thatched cottages in flames, a snowstorm, a tournament, lots of wildly galloping horsepersons, crazed



small children dressed as hunchbacks running gibbering through the audience, fire jugglers, ending with abbey in flames and a mass dance to (greatly amplified) Breton bagpipes whilst folks fired off hand-held Roman candles. Sur le summite to be sure (at one point live chickens were for some reason being thrown into the audience) but a great evening out. Plusieurs points.

Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> August **PFR Solo Explorations**

Crawled out of bed quite late. PFR again offered wider family his services as antiquarian courier but again rejected; most of them had already been to Montcontour (small town c 10 km east of Kernogan) anyway. On way to Moncountour succeeded both in buying diesel and in spotting a house suitable for a future Ryder residence – ruinous 17<sup>th</sup> century farmhouse with a round stair turret at a place called, very fittingly 'La Ville Norme' ('Normal Town'). Moncontour stands on a narrow ridge and is walled; much of its wall, or walls (there seem to be two or even three lines of wall in places) survive; there is a castle (although swamped in later houses; not much is visible) and a largely-18<sup>th</sup> century church containing a bust of St Mathiuien, under a stained glass window depicting the arrival of the said bust in the market place. Some old houses with the usual pretty Bretonic X-framing and round-arched doorways and lots of narrow lanes with flights of steps ('sneakyuppies' as Megan had reported).

### **Le Cherub Tombe**

Passing Moncontour on Tuesday we had missed a road turning (grievous error by new satnav, which is proving capricious and had told us to 'go straight on' when it actually meant 'turn right') and had spotted a road sign mentioning '10<sup>th</sup> century frescoes'. Worth going in search of, but it did not actually say where they were. They proved to be in Langast, in a church that looks late medieval on the outside. PFR entered, and was promptly joined by a small boy, maybe eight or nine, who was determined to act as guide, despite PFR protestations that 'je connait seulement un peu Francais'. He was a surprisingly knowledgeable guide, here 'onzieme siecle' and there 'treizieme siecle'; he also seemed very pious, pointing up at the crucifix whispering 'Jesuchristu' and then reading out some verses from a service book about 'notre peches'. PFR then tried to donate a couple of euros to the church, but the boy would not let him put the money in the box (which was labelled for guidebooks), no, he would show him where – in the porch, where he insisted that the coin was left in the (dry) holy water stoup. Boy then pressed his face into the service book (which he seemed to be calling a bible) and appeared to pray, PFR stood in respectful silence. Then he stated PFR should buy a guide to the church, from a shop down the road; PFR sallied forth, but could not find this, and returned, but child insisted and virtually drove him down the street 'sur la droite, sur la droite'; still no shop. Returned again; child had vanished – sadly (as he could not help but notice) along with the two euros from the stoup.... He had to be admired, firstly for his knowledge and secondly for his skill as a con artist, although someone should really have a word with him as to the care of his soul.

The church, actually, is rather remarkable. The nave walls are early, with what we would term herringbone masonry, and the arcades are simply separate plain round-headed arches, quite small, all plastered over with remarkable paintings on their soffits, angels and two figures helpfully labelled as St Mark and Melchizedek. In the exposed walling above the arcades are blocked round-headed windows. A guidebook (which PFR found within the church, after the child had departed) dates the paintings to between the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century; they could be coeval with the original building. The present aisles (replacing porticus?) chancel and west tower are all later medieval, as is the roof.

Returned to La Manoir for lunch; those who had agreed to come on an antiquarian trawl in the afternoon had now decided to go swimming in the lake instead, so more solo ramblings. St Leon has a pilgrimage chapel, partly 13<sup>th</sup> century and partly 15<sup>th</sup>; vaults removed in its later incarnation, although their wall shafts remain. Very faded remains of wall paintings, and a decaying painted ceiling difficult to see through suspended netting; it all feels a bit abandoned and in need of love, care and of course, money. Finally to Corlay to investigate the church and that chateau – this seems to have been a roughly quadrangular fortress, perhaps 13<sup>th</sup> century, with a big round tower at each corner. The north wall and north-west tower look good from the river to the north, but the ground level inside is much higher. Gateway on the east, a big arch with a smaller one alongside like a monastic one. Two later ranges of building (which seem to house a museum, something to do with horses) , one incorporating the south-west tower at one end. The largest tower, the donjon, seems to have been at the north-east, but the whole riverward half of it has gone, and all that is left of the south-west is a few courses of curving wall alongside the road.

Back through Corlay in the evening to run Meg and Lindsay to Caural, where they had booked a dinner for their wedding anniversary (apparently very good). Old Ryders walked round nearby Mur-de-Bretagne (with two pretty churches, dedicated to St Suzanne and St Peter) and then down to a creperie by the Lake (another reservoir, full of boats) which also provided a good feed. Bought a bottle of house red, which PFR consumed part of, then asked for the cork, en Francais, successfully, to take the rest home.

Friday 13<sup>th</sup> August. **A Wonder and a Marvel**

Mont St Michel, about 70 km east (and just into Normandy) is apparently the second most popular tourist destination in France, after the Eiffel Tower. We thought it would be a great day to visit it; coincidentally, so did the majority of the inhabitants of France. We could at least see it, a visual magnet on the northern horizon, when the queue of cars ground to a halt c 5 km short. Diverted onto little off-the-map sideroads and managed another km or so north, when abandoned car on a wide grass verge and walked, at first across fields and then joined a great winding queue on the causeway. It was high tide, so the car parks were still underwater. Nevertheless, the place was packed, and every step within the walls a shuffle in a queue. Taking pictures, looking up is alright; everything else is wall-to-wall people. Strangely, when one did try and aim ones lens at a lower subject, one of two people, a thin red bespectacled woman or a blue bald-headed man would immediately walk in front, whenever and wherever; were they a physical manifestation of some malign (at least to photographers) spiritual presence trapped in the warp and woof of the place?

How to describe Mont St Michael in a few words? A Benedictine abbey on top of a big rock. At sea level a curtain wall studded with towers girdles the granite upthrust, within which a road spirals upwards, overhung by ridiculously picturesque old houses, mostly timber-framed. The Abbey itself is a multi-storey or even high-rise establishment, with in places four or even five storeys of vaulted chambers carrying the church and cloister at the summit. The visitor's route starts with a gatehouse and then rises as a curving canyon between towering walls; eventually one finishes up in a platform-in-the-sky outside the 18<sup>th</sup>-century west front of the church, which was in fact shortened then, losing three bays of the original nave, which, together with the crossing, is Romanesque; the apsidal eastern arm is later

medieval. The 13<sup>th</sup> century cloister, on the north, is wonderful, with slender double arcades of trefoiled arches enriched with delicate foliage carving. On the west an open doorway, simply glazed to offer a spectacle of sky and sea, was intended to give access to the chapter house, never built as it would have to have been suspended on skyhooks. The route spirals down through successive levels of vaulted chambers, taking in the crypts beneath the eastern arm and south transept of the church, and a monk's ossuary (where on earth did they bury people here? Did they have some quick method of reducing corpses to easily-stored bones?). After this it rises again up a stair in an arched passage under the church forecourt, before recommencing the descent through the superimposed 13<sup>th</sup> century chambers that



carry the cloister, collectively known as 'The Marvel' and finally emerging into gardens taking one back east beneath the north side of the monastery to rejoin the approach just below the gatehouse. From here the rampart walk of the town walls offers an alternative route back down, mixing glimpses of the abbey far above the timber-framed and tiled or shingled houses with ones of thronged and very expensive restaurants. Back at sea level, took out a mortgage on a takeaway crepe-with-strawberry-

jam, and found a bus that took us back 3 km to the main road, and a shorter walk eastward back to the car, passing an establishment offering free tasting of local drinks from firewater to poire (ELR bought three bottles at 4.5% for her own consumption, doubtless the beginning of a slow descent). Found our way back down minor roads to a village called Bree (OK this really is Middle Earth, Mont St Michel could not exist anywhere else) and then onto the dual carriageway back west; brief stop to glance at the cathedral at Dol-du-Bretagne and then to Dinan, where found the Cordeliers – three sides of the cloister of a Franciscan friary) open and hosting an art exhibition. PFR then sketched cross slabs in the Church of St Saviour (good Romanesque west front and south wall of nave), Megan photographed a cat, Elaine bought bowls so she could feel more ethnically-correct when imbibing poirrets.

Back to a final meal where people tried to cook vaguely French things that sort of worked, finished up vin (waste not want not!), said thanks and cheerio to Brian and Jacqueline.

Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> August **The Long Road Home, and a Spot of Excitement on the way.**

Rose with dawn just dawning, ELR having already performed her packing magic the night before. Luggage had radically expanded due to Lindsay's plusiers de bouteilles (50<sup>2</sup>). Freewheeled down the hills into St Breuc, so car fuel gauge (filled up last night) would still indicate full, left car, put key in box, and struggled onto 8.07 Paris train.

TGV not quite as good as it is cracked up to be. No room for cases; piled up in entrance lobby or precariously balanced on overhead racks. Fully auto toilets – but flushing needed prolonged stamping on floor button, and paper dispenser only dispensed sheets in rent fragments. Train rattled and shook as it sped along; PFR wrote until he felt sick.

In Paris cases just too much to face Metro with, so took taxi (at four times the cost!) to Gare Nord, where two hours to wait, so camped in cafe of edge of platform. Sausage and frites which are small-bore hardened apologies for chips. Elaine sorting out our last euros when one note was snatched by a young girl who ran away, pursued by Lindsay and a puffing PFR shouting 'voleur voleur!' and 'gendarme'. To our surprise (a) we caught her and (b) gendarmes immediately appeared. Police seemed civilised and reasonable, culprit fairly unmoved; suspect this scenario has been repeated before (the manager at the cafe says it is a persistent problem). Necessary form-filling-in and statement taking meant catching the 1413 Eurostar was a close-run thing.

The rest was pretty uneventful; marked return to England by finding a fish-and-chip shop close to Kings Cross – tolerable rather than great – and then rump seizure again on the long drag north. Home a bit after 20.00, grateful for safe returns after a better-than-expected sojourn on foreign soil.

PFR



*St-Thegonnec –*

*dolphins as arms to the choir stalls.*

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<sup>2</sup> An exaggeration; actually 28.