

BIKEABOUT2011 ; TRAVELS AND TRAVAILS/ TWO RYDERS IN FRANCE

WHY

A few months ago PFR, pottering on the WEB, came across the news that La Verna had been opened to the ordinary public. La Verna is a cavern – or more strictly, a cavern within a cavern, in the Pyrenees. When discovered it was the largest natural chamber in the world – now it is down to 14th, after enormous voids in places like Sarawak, Borneo and China; it is part of the Pierre St Martin system, the exploration of which (in the 1950s) was recounted by PFR's teenage hero Norbert Casteret, the great French speleologist. After a lifetime of little caves, to see a really big one seemed too good an opportunity to pass by....

HOW

This had to be an adventure. Motor bikes are more adventurous than cars, so we bought one specially for the trip – a rather well-worn 2002 Honda Deauville. Purchased on e-bay, and collected from a shed in a back alley one rainy March day in Keighley, it was perhaps not the best buy.... but that is another story. We had to purchase all sorts of new bits and pieces for it, to make it safely rideable, but you can still hear it clattering half a mile away...

First a word on riding a motor bike; many people, quite sensibly, don't do this, so they perhaps ought to be informed of a few salient factors...

I ride a motor bike, therefore I am a biker, although perhaps an unusual sub-species of the general genus. I am a non-mechanical biker; my bike has two wheels and something in between them that makes them go round; that is about all I know. I know which button to press to start it, what to turn to make it go faster, and the things to pull and press on to make it slow down. This can cause problems. At a biker's café I sat down next to another guy, and said hello; he promptly burst into a torrent of far too much information regarding the heights and depths of his passionate relationship with the interior of his carburetor. His eyes gleamed and he foamed slightly at the mouth. It was all profoundly embarrassing; I was not even sure if I had a carburetor.....

So why do I ride one of these machines? Thinking about the 2,300 odd miles in the last fortnight, and the measures of pleasure and pain that they bought, it came out something like this. Pleasure, even BLISS is possible. This is 50mph on a quiet country road through a wonderful landscape, on a fine dry day- but then comes STRESS; the following stress factors were all experienced in the last fortnight.

- (1) Crawling traffic; walking pace on a heavy bike two-up is excruciatingly difficult. Hips! Oh how they hurt!
- (2) Flying ant up left nostril.
- (3) Belgian drivers
- (4) Belgian roads
- (5) Belgium
- (6) Stair-rods rain
- (7) Sun (set the controls for the heart of...); Great Glaring Orb syndrome, as one heads west directly into the thing at sunset, one hand in front of the eyes, on a Belgian motorway where the traffic is one moment is at 80 mph and the next screeching to a halt, with drivers frantically dodging between lanes. Nightmare
- (8) Twisty little roads through Pyrenean forests, with immense drops below them and the ever present possibility of a misjudgement precipitating one into space.
- (9) French roadworks; no traffic lights, you just have to take your chances winding between workmen and machines on a loose gravel or hardcore surface. Near impossible.
- (10) The moment the pillion rider mounts; the driver braces themselves, legs splayed, whilst the sylph-like form/pendulous bulk of he/she thrusts themselves skyward over the panniers and box, and for a timeless moment hangs suspended whilst gravity strives with flesh; the moment of peril, will we fall to the left or



the right? and then finally they settle, and we are ready for the moment of open the throttle, take feet off the floor, and wobble forwards...

All these can reduce one to a screaming gibbering wreck, and possibly a dead one, as roads are dangerous places; one gets and might even take the life of a fellow human being (probably a Belgian) in the process—so bad for the soul!. This is a perilous business; one really needs to be careful.

THE ANNALS

1. Friday May 25th and Saturday May 26th. Most of the Length of the Country.

We disembark from Plymouth, which is a long way from home. PFR took two days to get there, on his bike, a Honda Deauville 650 which he is still a bit wary of, a heavy beast bought because it had built-in panniers which turned out to be (a) wafer thin and (b) have a tendency to flap open unexpectedly whilst in motion. He left home at 6.10 am Friday morning, to slog south down A68 and then A1, breakfast with friends at Ranby (S of Doncaster) and then A 624 down to A46 (Fosse Way) and down round Leicester to (briefly) M1 then M69 and the old and rural Fosse Way proper down to Swindon, and a visit to the National Monuments Record to copy some of their old photographs of various Durham and Northumberland buildings; finally 30 odd miles N again to friends at Cheltenham. A late night before did not help – he has never yawned so much whilst riding a motorbike – and staying up until past midnight again watching a DVD of ‘Avatar’ on the TV was probably not ideal. Slept well, not surprisingly.

Saturday morning ELR left Riding Mill on 0625 train, and PFR left Cheltenham 9.30; windy, grey and the odd shower. The M5 was awful – stop/start congestion, dire walking-pace crawling at times, and three hours to cover 50 miles; eventually abandoned the motorway for a final 30 miles of much more picturesque country roads to Exeter, but still arrived just in time to meet ELR at 1500 (her train was 15 mins late). Once we were out of traffic-jammed Exeter, much easier riding S on A38 through lovely Devon countryside (despite showers now heavy and prolonged) to Plymouth for 1600.

Plymouth is an interesting place, very maritime; our guest house was right beside the Hoe, a grassy ridge (where Drake had his famous game of bowls which he refused to allow to be interrupted by tidings of the Armada) with a big wheel (horribly expensive) and the original 18th-century Eddystone Lighthouse transplanted here by the Victorians. To the west the sprawling 17th century citadel inside a zig-zagging defensive wall rather like Berwick’s defences. Below it to the north-west a maze of picturesque old streets, with at one point the ‘Tudor House’ and the ‘Elizabethan House’ facing each other; found a ruined fragments which may be part of the medieval Castle, then fed in ‘Himalayan Spice’, itself a 16th-century building, good food but a glass of house red turned out to be a fiver, which is surely over the top.

2. Sunday May 27th. In the Morning went to Church

Plymouth was having an event, a half marathon, starting from the Hoe, so lots of streets were sealed off, loud speakers speaking loud, annoyed car drivers being forcibly diverted. After breakfast we discovered that the service in St Andrew’s Church, now termed a Minster, took place at 0930 – and it was already 0920. To give thanks for the return of Faith (as reported to us by Emma our lodger; the errant feline came back last night after an absence of ten days or so). Off we went; had our own sprint to arrive puffing and sweaty half way through the first hymn. 0930 was the mainstream morning service, following an 0800 BCP and preceding a trendy 1100 with worship band and lots of baptisms. Mostly older people, lots of smart country squire types and older ladies, enthusiastic young cleric (curate?) who preached a very sound evangelical sermon, which clearly implied some members of his congregation might be out whereas he was in. It was a sermon of the sort that underlines certain scriptures at the expense of others... Anglican communion is always good however, and we were certainly warmly welcomed. At the end as we left for coffee a girl with flame-coloured hair was warming up for the 1100 service playing that new Stuart Townend Easter hymn, and the recall of its lyrics that the tune prompted compensated for the strangely-unattractive sermon. The church (hey, note this is mentioned last) is largely Perp, big and fully aisled with a fine west tower; burned out in the 1941 bombing; ‘Garden Church’ services were held in the roofless shell but the 1950s brought restoration and lots of dramatic new stained glass. PFR briefly excited by guide sheet reference to a 12th-century tombstone but it turned

out to be a very battered effigy that looked later medieval. Had coffee in a church hall attached to ‘The Abbey’ which is in fact a well preserved 15th century priest’s house.

Had a walk to see Charles Church, also burned out in the War and this time still a shell, stranded in the middle of a busy roundabout. Pedestrian subways all around, but none for the visiting ecclesiologist; their only access is by a dangerous dash through the whirling maelstrom of traffic. As the name suggests, permission to build was granted under Charles I, and this is posthumous Gothic, not yet Gothick, medieval in form, aisled body and west tower with spire, post-medieval in its mouldings and quirky tracery, although inevitably there looks to have been some Victorian interference. On the north of the tower a couple of late medieval doorways had been re-erected against the original walls; were they brought from one of the town’s friaries? (none of which seem to have left any upstanding remains)

The streets now full of a million runners going home triumphant, all wearing their medals (everyone a winner!); how anyone could even stand up after running that far?. Climbed into all the bike gear, packed up and followed signs to the ferry terminal, to find hordes of bikers waiting to embark, every machine shinier and better equipped than ours. Eventually trundled aboard, had bike strapped down, but could not get into our cabin because it had not been hoovered yet – half an hour sitting on the passage floor waiting, before we could at least dump all our sweaty gear on the bed and go up on deck to spectate our exit, with lots of interesting things to look at, notably an artificial breakwater with a 19th-century blockhouse or fort at its centre (right) and a lighthouse at one end at the very mouth of the flooded inlet on which the Plymouth lies.



Huge ferry; top deck even has a swimming pool which must slop around wonderfully if the Bay of Biscay is rough. Thousands of passengers; a few look distinctly dubious, and the tannoy girl has just summoned a ‘Meester Itler’ to reception, which was disturbing. 1830 eating in faith that food will stay down; sea does not look rough, and sitting down there is just a gentle undulation, but try and walk anywhere... it is amusing watching other folk trying.

Went to bed ridiculously early – 2030 – two tier bunks (upper folds down from ceiling). Rocked gently to sleep on the bosom of the deep (well, for a while) but in reality spent the next twelve hours dozing fitfully in between rolling over and finding to find a position that did not ache too much, not quite awake enough to bother getting up. We should be in the notorious Bay of Biscay by now, with the ocean and the voyagers both heaving violently – but in fact rose to find us gliding across a veritable millpond, an immensity of calm blueness with a maritime rainbow for good measure. Full English Breakfast (last for a while) without any qualms.

3. Monday May 30th. Briefly Hispanic.

Hot, dry, dusty, vivid red ochre, fierce and friendly, fiesta-ing, siesta-ing, Gaudi-styling, Armada-sending Bovine-brutalising Spain, we only struck you a glancing blow today. Five hours and around 130 miles from disembarkation before escape into the more familiar pastures of France. The floating city glided (glid?) into Santander, almost as picturesque a port as Plymouth, and we joined the demonic horde of around 150 odd revving motorcycles in the stygian depths of hold no 2 before the doors opened and we all swarmed for the exit and thundered up the ramp onto Spanish soil. This first bit, a foreign city, and us on the wrong side of the road, is always stressful, but the satnav took us east, all one road, and we were soon out of town on good dual carriageway. Up, down, swinging left, swinging right, through geomorphological-textbook vistas and surreal combinations of rocky valleys, heavy industry and tower blocks. A lot of money has been and is being spent here; some of it was too new for the satnav to know about. Deep cuttings sliced through contorted layer-cake geology, and the road frequently plunged through a few hundred metres of tunnel, or crossed lofty viaducts. All very scenic, but the volume of traffic was forever

increasing; sadly many Spanish drivers are lacking in charity, grace and brain cells; the inside lane was forever diving off to places one did not want to go, forcing one to make sudden changes; indicating however only made approaching drivers accelerate to stop you pulling out; many were driving at way over the speed limits anyway, so it was a journey one wanted to get to the end of, and still be alive. Stopped twice, once in an arid picnic-layby (although PFR got excited by seeing a Clouded Yellow) (butterfly) and then in a services for coffee and a euro-standard chocolate muffin, with dreadful TV playing full volume in the foreground. B & B just south of Biarritz seems fine; Elaine wallowed in the garden swimming pool, PFR dozed. Monsieur le Chat, sitting on the drive, is a handsome grey and white tabby.

The Price of Arthake

The beach and restaurants we were told by the B&B lady, were ‘two hundred yards’. As we have found before, the French concept of a yard is novel; they probably think it is one of those elongate walled areas at the rear of an English terrace house, much as we think their metre is something electrical in a cupboard under the stairs. Anyway, two hundred French ones make up a good mile, across golf links and vast empty car parks. The sea was great - blue, green, and long lines of breaking rollers – but the only open restaurant was expensive. As the only alternative was to walk a mile back, get the bike and brave Biarritz (and no wine for PFR), we bit the metaphorical bullet, which turned out to be a merlu – their cheapest option (39E, cheap?), a fish which, according to the dictionary on Elaine’s phone, was in fact a hake. In fact the corpse of quite a substantial hake, laid out on an elongate tureen, to be shared between two. The white bits were nice, but had to be disentangled from the wreckage of its skeleton; PFR had a near-choking fit when inadvertently ingesting a bone. Anyway, we could watch the waves, and think about the as-yet-unmolested hake frolicking beneath them. Even more yards on the way back as we got lost.

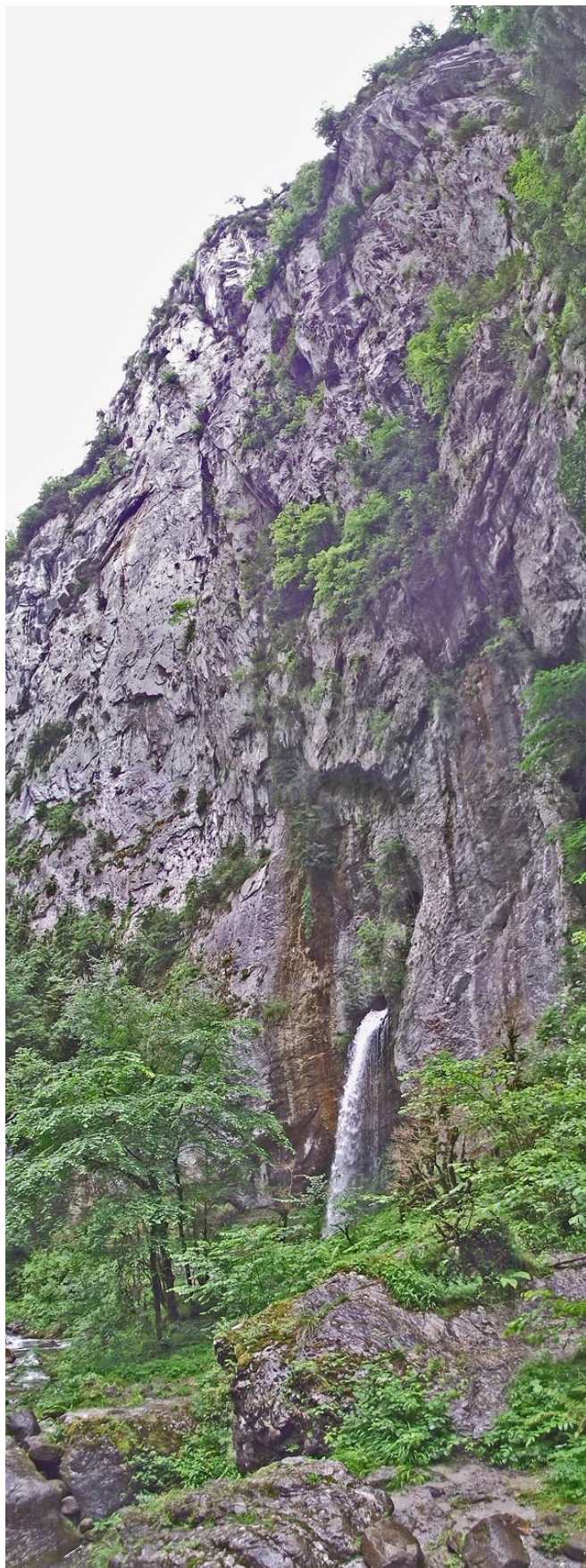


4. Tuesday 31st May. Into the Mountains

Comfortable night, but Tuesday morning grey and rainy, good Continental breakfast, Monsieur le Chat came in soggy and scrambled onto PFRs knee. Had intended to ride the Biarritz seafront but there were road works (10 kph limit) where one had to weave on loose hardcore around the roadworkers vehicles and machinery, and that was just a bridge too far. Instead set the satnav for Hastings. The first half hour was grim – traffic lights, slow-moving queues, sat nav misbehaving and trying to send us down impossible little lanes, or on occasions showing roundabouts that did not exist – goodness knows there were enough real ones. Eventually escaped from conurbation to countryside. First call Abbaye d’Arthous, a Premonstratensian house with its Romanesque church a bit battered but intact; cruciform, three apses to east, aisleless nave. Wonderful carved corbel table to east end. Cloister on north, with picturesque but largely post-medieval buildings on north and west; north end of east range and attached rere dorter (?) to east remained. The church is now an archaeological museum, with simulated excavation of a Roman tessellated pavement in the nave and sundry displays that vary between edification and artwork (eg huge pile of broken modern crockery). Noisy class of excited small children arrived to be educated, so departed – sun out briefly, but the rain soon returned.

Quick look at a roadside church (locked) with a massive tower (St Glaide, just S of Sauveterre-de-Béarn) then lunch in Mauléon-Licharre. Still raining. Bought edibles in a boulangerie, one scruffy bar open, ordered coffees and used distinctly seedy facilities in rear yard. Barman perfectly happy to let us eat what we had purchased; teenage lad came in and then said farewell to everyone as he left (including kiss on both cheeks for ELR); you would not find this is England! Felt we were part of a community.

South to Ste Engrace (Ste – means dedication is to a female saint), into hill country with increasingly twisty roads, vertiginous wooded valley sides, broken by sheer limestone crags, soaring into low cloud. Found our bunkhouse, right beside an attractive Romanesque church crowning a roadside knoll, then trundled a couple of miles back down valley to the car park for the Gorges de Kakouetta; paid a rather silent café man 4.5E each for the privilege of a walk



up the gorge, then descended steeply to a green lake, hemmed in by limestone cliffs, in the valley bottom, up to a bridge over a tributary gorge on the other side, along a ledge (with handrail) and then up and down steep scree paths before reaching the gorge proper; a short artificial tunnel led to a series of wooden walkways hanging from overhanging rock walls, alternating with rough riverside paths, whilst far above was a narrow slot of sky. After 2 km came to a dramatic cascade shooting out of a yawning cave about 20 m up the overhanging left (east) wall (left) ; shortly beyond the path reaches another more accessible cave, debouching a smaller stream, and extends into the twilight zone allowing a glimpse of some big old stalactites.

Back to Ste Engrace and a look at the church, with some excellent sculptured capitals and the usual apses; unusual was quite a lofty gable-roofed tower raised above the west end of the south aisle, and the partially-surviving south and west walls of a medieval building attached to the west, said to be an 'ancien abbaye'. Inside this was a whole forest of little discoidal headstones (21 in all) guidebook writes get quite excited about. They are very like some we saw a few years ago at Carcassone, there attributed to the Cathars, but they are also very like some from North Eastern England.

Evening meal in the inn to which the bunkhouse is attached, in an interesting upstairs room with a bressumer for a firehood, a slop stone in the side wall, and, intriguingly, a holy water stoup carved with religious symbols, or do-it-yourself house blessings. Excellent feed (although the French present objected that the wine was in fact Spanish); French conversation, so PFR concentrated on the wine, except when the conversation came round (as it does; this is France) to medieval grave slabs and he felt honour bound to make a contribution. Then all retired to the bunkhouse, with its serried rows of slumberers; everyone very quiet and considerate. This sort of place can only work if everyone behaves, and they did (could it happen in the UK? Doubtful, especially if there was free wine on offer as here) Most folk are on long-distance walks; one Dutch girl en route from Atlantic to Mediterranean.

5. Wednesday 1st June Touching the Void

Despite quiet, PFR did not sleep that well; rose early to write up log. The other negative about bunkhouse and inn is that both (and perhaps all places here) were full of flies, plunging into ones soup, alighting on ones bread, scampering around ones cranium. After breakfast-with-flies, departed a km back down the road to the carpark for La Verna. This is why we had come. La Verna is the immense chamber (for a while the largest in the world) in the Pierre St Martin cave system, discovered in the 1950s in the depths of a really serious pothole. The first explorers on entering it thought they were outdoors at night, then checked their watches.... Soon afterwards an artificial tunnel was drilled into it, to tap the subterranean river for HEP, but it only opened as a show cave last year. We had booked in, so at 9.00 we were collected by the Director himself, Jean-Francois Godart, and taken (just the two of us) in a landrover up an exciting rough track ascending the dramatic gorge that splits the south side of the main valley opposite Ste Engrace church, a drive with don't-look-down moments. Eventually arrived at a cliff with a metal gate. Inside was a comfortable walking-sized tunnel, with lights; after five minutes striding along it came to a junction.



This was where the HEP folk had expected to meet the cave, but the first cave survey was a hundred or so metres out. They drove left, and found a cave, but the wrong one – a quite separate river system, now with around 20 km of passage. The main cave was resurveyed; they drove right, and eventually hit it. We went through a second metal door, and came out into darkness; our guide put on lights one by one, to reveal the immensity around us. La Verna is 400 m across and 200 m high, and roughly circular; we were on a balcony (part of a viewing gallery that extended the full length of one wall) about half way up. In a couple of places are illuminated life-size models of cavers, two in the mouth of a huge high-level passage half way up the far wall, two down at the lowest point; without them it would be hard

to grasp the immense scale. Over to the left the cave river enters (actually most of it is engulfed by an HEP pipe just as it does so); we scrambled down a boulder and scree slope to see the bottom of the cascade at floor level, where it disappears under boulders and is not seen again until its resurgence in a pool in the main gorge. We then returned to the balcony, and went up the gallery to the top of the chamber where the water comes in, and there is a small HEP dam, bearing commemorative plaques to two cavers killed in the system, one Marcel Loubens who fell in the Lepineux Shaft, the original entrance to the system. You can visit the base of it on a 5-hour 'adventure trip' the upstream cave goes on far beyond this, dividing into tributaries, and there are now several other entrances at still-higher levels, as well as downstream passages leading from the high-level series on the other side of La Verna, with shafts dropping deep below its floor. The vertical range of the system is now around 1400 m, and the length around 50 km. Yet this is only one of a dozen river systems now known in this area. These are not sink-to-rising caves like most of those in Britain, but pick up water underground; there are now no impermeable beds overlying the massive limestones, although there were once Flysch deposits, now eroded away. It was on these that the streams arose which formed the vertical shafts which now give access from the high plateau to the underground river far below. Why is this one immense chamber here? It seems to be something to do with collapse through the schists which normally form the impermeable bed of the cave allowing solution of much more ancient Devonian limestone below. PFR took photographs, which surprisingly seemed to come out quite well – lighting is tactful and restrained, there are no show cave fripperies here. An observation gallery runs the full length of the cavern, up to the HEP dam. It is all a bit much for words.

Reluctantly back to the surface; the rest of the day could not but be somewhat downhill after this! Ate at a roadside inn (Auberge l'etable) then through tamer scenery down to Pau, quite a big city with its Promenade de Pyrenees providing a fine vantage point for the vista south, with rising tiers of wooded hills backed by the peaks themselves, some still snowy. There is a big chateau with a variety of stone and brick towers, spanning seven centuries (from the 12th to the 19th); going inside would have cost money and the afternoon was running on. Our chambre d'hotels took

some finding, postally it was in Corroaze, a few km short of Lourdes, but could not find it there and had to ring for help, so madame came to collect us; it was actually quite a few km further to the north-east, on a ridge commanding fine views south towards the Pyrenees proper. Hot sticky and weary; PFR rested, ELR wallowed in garden pool. Very comfortable, pleasant evening meal with rapid French conversation to the background of Coco the parrot (in the next room) who alternating piercing whistles with the realistic sound of wine being poured from a bottle, as one would expect from a perroquet francais. Brief visit from a pair of herrison (hedgehogs). It pleut heavily overnight, but bike safely stowed in the basement garage.

6. Thursday 2nd June North and North-East

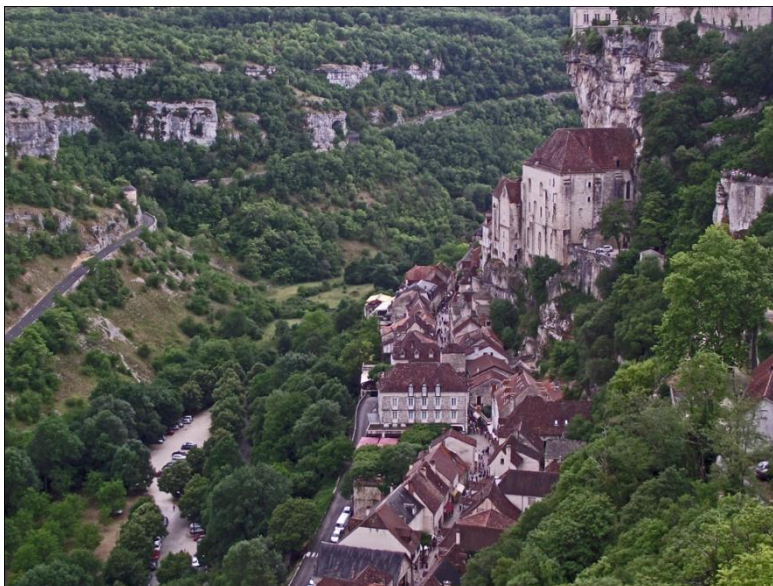
Left 10.00, grey and drizzly, but this soon eased. Avoiding major roads, so planned on map first and then fed a string of village names, roughly one every 20 km, into satnav one-by-one. This worked quite well, although progress was not fast. Lots of villages too slow to 30 or even 20 mph for, quite a lot of twisty hills, almost all up! We seemed to be going in the direction where the ups are scarp slopes (always wooded) and are followed by long gentle (and much straighter) downs. Stopped for fuel (not much over 50 mpg) and then an abbey at Simorre, a Benedictine church, all brick except for the west end of the nave which looks a post-medieval rebuild; low octagonal tower over crossing and a taller square one adjacent to the north-west, which apparently linked the church to the now-vanished cloisters. Excellent carved stalls, late medieval, on three sides of the square east end. Two more abbeys soon after, Bolaur and Planselve (Cistercian) but both frustrating, as the first was still in full use (access by guided visits 1100, 1600 and 1700, and it was 1330) and the second now a farm, with lots of private go-away notices. There was a good stone gatehouse fronting onto the road, and brick buildings beyond, one north-south range (west range?) with what looked like a bit of church attached at its north end, and extensive precinct walls. Needed somewhere to eat our picnic lunch, and found Mauvezin, with a beautiful arcaded square and old market hall, very irregular in plan, with a first of circular stone piers carrying a wonderfully vernacular roof structure, perhaps 18th century? By now it was 1500, and we still had 100 km to go, so changed plan and went onto more major roads, trusting satnav. As one passes through the landscape, styles of church change, and hereabouts octagonal towers and spires appear, often in brick, perhaps a reflection of Saint Sernin in Toulouse, not that far away the S. The revised travel scheme worked OK; rounded the major conurbation of Montauban without undue grief and then 20 km of motorway thrash to Caussabe, then more fast straight secondary road, to arrive at Angles St Felix and La Grange (where we had stayed in November 2008) to be welcomed by Fabienne; PFR had a relaxing hour sitting in the garden drinking tea and sketching the highly-picturesque old buildings. Last time we stayed in the newly-converted barn (probably late medieval); this time the accommodation there was fully booked but Fabienne let us have a room in her adjacent house. The other guests were three pairs of French bikers (all with larger and superior machines); pleasant evening meal, with the usual high-speed conversation which ELR understood in part and PFR barely at all. Duck again, in various forms; vaguely recall that the French do unpleasant things to ducks (or is it geese?); to the English, natural law surely states that ducks should be bobbing on village ponds and contented quacking. However went with the gastronomic flow, putting up quick prayers for forgiveness to both ducks and their Creator. Very tasty actually. Firewater before, wine during, firewater after.

7. Friday 3rd June. Half way up a cliff.

Slept soundly and awoke to a fine morning; cheerful breakfast then saw other bikers off, then farewells to Fabienne and a short ride to Belcastel; one pannier flapped open and had to go back a mile to retrieve one of our bags of clothes from the middle of the road. Belcastel is an intensely picturesque old village (almost a bit too picturesque to be real) in a steep-sided valley, with an ancient bridge, and overlooking all, a dramatic castle, totally ruinous until twenty or thirty years ago when a well-known French architect restored it; it is now owned by Americans, but open to the public. It is a very compact castle, with a tall square keep and tiny courtyards clustered around it at different levels, and small round towers on the external periphery. It was restoration (and subsequent furnishing) with no expenses spared; there is a lot of stained glass (some genuine medieval), lots of suits of armour standing around, and displays of modern paintings of dragons etc, so it is all quite fun. More significantly (for PFR) there is a supposedly 9th-century chapel incorporated into the medieval castle, the sort of thing that seems to have happened quite often in England (eg Newcastle, Barnard Castle, Scarborough etc).

Then away cross-country to the north-west for 80 km or so to Rocamadour, a very strange place. Lunchtime pizza-with-flies in a grubby little town a few km short of our destination. The landscape hereabouts has fertile uplands alternating with incised meandering valleys, often with great limestone cliffs along the sides. Rocamadour is situated in, or rather plastered to the side of, one of these. The old town itself, with several medieval gates, is strung out

along the foot of a towering and overhanging crag (afficionados of the Yorkshire Dales think Kilnsey Crag) whilst half way up the crag is a great block of ecclesiastical buildings, the largest the 13th century Basilica de Saint Saviour. A zigzagging path up a broad gully, equipped with Stations of the Cross, takes one to the top of the cliff, where there is a Castle. Rocamadour was, and is, a popular pilgrimage spot, although the majority of the hosts who flock there today are secular tourists; a few genuine pilgrims, mostly older people in small groups, are still in evidence. At the top of the cliff are vast car parks, eating places, an information centre, and, rather surprisingly a show cave 'Grotte des Merveilles'. The



afternoon was hot and the place was heaving. How it all started no-one is quite sure, but by the 12th century a burial had been found optimistically identified as that of a personal servant of the Virgin Mary; there is also a tradition that Zaccheus ended up as a hermit here (one version has him marrying Saint Veronica).

The information centre helpfully found us a bed and breakfast, about 20 km north at Souillac; more hairpin bends and limestone valleys on the way. A bit more cheap-and-cheerful than some, but seems fine. Heavy rain soon after we arrived.

By 2000 rain cleared, so walked into town; Monsieur le Rat scampered past as we left; under a curving railway viaduct and found the main street; the first Hotel we came too looked decent, and indeed was. The humble omelette grows in stature here, and PFRs rouge vin was highly effective; wonderful late sunset as ELR steered him the km or so back to the B&B. Thin walls; PFR suffered stereo snoring from ELR (left) et un famille francais through the wall on the right. Nevertheless, slept pretty well.

8. Saturday 4th June. An Eglise, a Gouffre and a Grotte

Breakfast and into town; warm and sunny. Souillac has a long and rather mundane main street, but tucked away to the west at its south end is the old urban core, with its Benedictine abbey church. The monastic buildings on the south look 18th century (and do not seem to be readily accessible) but the church is Romanesque, albeit, as often, somewhat restored; its eastern apse has a series of little polygonal chapels opening off. The aisleless nave is vaulted in a series of circular domes; there are some excellent capitals in the apse (we enjoyed a pair of owls being attacked by small birds; is this wisdom being mocked by folly, or are owls bad?) the out) but the outstanding feature, unusually, is the carved internal surround to the west door, with a superb figure of the Prophet Isaiah (very like the one at Mouissac) on the north, and above him a column of wonderfully-interwoven beasts and men. Only the upper part survives of a corresponding column on the south; they carry an arch, with beneath it a great carved panel with saints and ?beast-headed men or ?demons. PFR frustrated trying to get sharp photographs; will the camera just not focus properly in the gloom?

Then to Padirac and its Gouffre – or traditionally, its Puits (well). Around 30 km ride to the south-west, like Rocamadour this is a huge tourist attraction with acres of car and bus parks and lots of eating houses. We had to queue for half an hour or so; it can be much worse! Set in gently-rolling wooded countryside with little sign of karst features, the well is a huge open circular shaft, 75 m (250ft) deep. There are of course legends, involving St Peter and the Devil. You can go down by lift (in three stages) or down staircases, which we did. At the bottom more steep flights of steps zig-zag down to the river, which is really just a little stream. It rises by c 0.30 cm in the winter we are told, but that is all. Once down, you walk a couple of hundred metres along a fine canyon passage, and meet the end of the queue for the boats, and another wait, but only quarter of an hour or so. A dozen or more boats, each carrying eleven souls, work their way back and forward along a few hundred metres of narrow lake, each punted by a guide who stands at the back. As you glide along the dimensions of the passage increase – lighting is restrained and subtle

– and then you disembark again in a big chamber with huge stalactite flows cascading down from far above. At first the guide takes you through at stream level, to see some huge gours; at the furthest point of the visit, is a gour/pitch of around 10 metres, with another lake visible below. There are many kilometres more of passage (and inlets) ending in sumps which in 1996 were dived through to the resurgence. Turning back, we now ascended lots of steps, up into a huge soaring cavern (the Great Dome) with formations everywhere; it is around 90 m high and almost breaks through to the surface. We were allowed a brief time for awe and wonder, then back down steps to the boats and the return voyage. An immense number of people pass through this place every day, and really, it is handled very well. The crowds and the amiable banter of the boatmen/guides do not detract from the natural spectacle, although of course we wanted to know more about the 30odd km of passage we had not seen, and to see a proper survey.



The cafe on the surface was a lot less impressive than the cave; despite two requests ELR never got her glass of water to go with her coffee and we had crepes, thin pancaky things with a dash of lemon juice, which are really a pretty minimal foodstuff. Padirac was wonderful, but we did want to see a painted cave; the Grotte de Cougnac (or, as we found out, Grottes). This was around 40 km to the east, north of the town of Gourdon, so we set the satnav and went; thankfully it was pretty easy riding, and we arrived with twenty minutes to spare before the last visit. Once again we were in gently rolling wooded countryside, and on top of a ridge without much exposed rock; it did not seem a likely spot for caves.

There is a small modern museum building, and beside it a flight of steps descends to a doorway through which one enters the first cave, found in 1949 by a water diviner; it seems to be mainly one chamber, quite broad but no more than 5 m high, absolutely full of formations, the roof tight-packed with stalactites, so close there is barely any space between them, and the floor with tall thin columns rising everywhere. Clearly some have had to be felled to allow visitors to walk around.

The second cave is a few hundred metres away, reached by a pleasant path along the wooded ridge top, and entered through a doorway in a wall alongside an old farm; the first chamber served as a cellar for the farm, and the further passages were only found in 1952. Again it is all dry. The first (cellar) chamber houses a display of carved stonework of various periods, brought from Gourdon; PFR got excited by a Merovingian coped tomb slab, a gabled 'man's last house' which showed many affinities to coped slabs in the North of England – tiling on the 'roof', a cross on the end gable etc. Photography is not allowed in the cave proper here (because of fears it might damage the paintings) but we were allowed to take pictures of this. Then down steps (and a section that must have been dug out) into another cave very like the first, absolutely filled with formations; it only goes for a hundred metres or so, but in the final chamber there is one wall that for some reason is more or less clear of stal, and here are the paintings. Neanderthal man lived in the first chamber (c50,000 BP) and Cro-Magnon folk were responsible for the paintings, between 25000 and 14000 BP. The older drawings are in red ochre; the later in charcoal. There are 22 animals in all (including ibex, giant deer and mammoth), 4 humans (a bit dubious, the two clearest riddled with spears, which suggests that folk did not exactly live in peace and harmony at this time) and 274 'signs', mostly simple finger marks but including some complex geometrical forms. As caves go this is a fairly friendly one, and by the flickering light of a tallow lamp the packed formations must certainly have given it the air of a numinous place, but in trying to reconstruct what the artists meant, and what they believed, we are at a dangerous interface. The dating too is a bit puzzling. A couple of years ago PFR heard a talk by a Romanian academic who was also a Young Earth Creationist, one of his prime arguments was that radiometric dating shows that very similar cave paintings were

being produced many millennia apart; was this really credible? In the polarised modern world it is difficult to hear any voices other than the Fundamentalists who take on board a literal Noachian deluge c 4000 BC, with almost all our rocks laid down after it (oh dear....) and the straight academics who dare not admit that radiometric dating may be unreliable in case they give ground to the other side.

It was now 18.45; thunder was distantly rumbling and the skies dramatic. Would we get back to Souillac unsoaked? It turned out to be a pleasant ride; in one village (Masclat) was an old building that looked just like a bastle house, round-arched byre entrance in one gable



end and external stone steps up to a first floor door in the side wall. Took its picture. We ended up bowling along beside the Riviere Dordogne at the foot of big limestone crags, than over a narrow bridge into the streets of Souillac. The storm in fact went off somewhere else; had an evening meal at the chambre d'hote, pleasant folk and food – but, once more, DUCK, this time in the form of pie. One day will we gaze through our (remorseful) tears ‘upon a soundless quacking host?’ (pace Francis Thompson) - or perhaps, to misquote Lady Macbeth, have our consciences toss on the multitudinous seas incanardine.

9. Sunday 5th June Into the Middle

Left Souillac and promptly got lost – took wrong turn at first roundabout (the one we had been directed to as having ‘something horrible in the middle’, the something being a set of three paper-thin arches, very definitely art-that-failed) and Satnav promptly sent us up a motorway, which we both had to pay for, and took us far too far north; came off and headed south-east, and after rather more than an hour had a stop at Beaulieu, back on the Riviere



Dordogne. Here there is a lovely Cluniac abbey church; only got a quick look inside as folk were going in to Mass, but got a guide, and had a good look outside; fantastic tympanum (left), unusually depicting the Second Coming, although plenty of diabolic beasts as well. Big later medieval tower clapped onto south-west corner of the Romanesque church. The cloister was on the north – a good chapter house survives, and some ragged walls of other buildings. Bought lunch, had a coffee, and moved on ; some good fast road east to Aurillac, a major town, but being Sunday found difficulty in finding a garage open – automatic ones here do not like English cards. Then north of east, stopping to picnic at a roadside picnic-layby (monolithic stone tables and chairs, like something from the Flintstones). We are entering

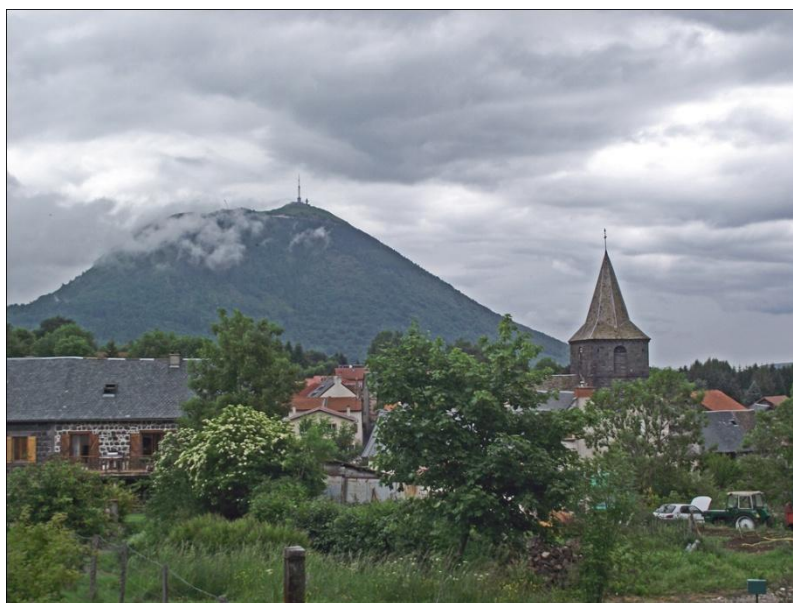
the Central Massif, and the landscapes change. No limestone for a start; the geology is now plainly igneous, with columnar basalts and red and brown lavas, and the hills which rise to the north of the road have spiky peaklets or puy, remnants of old volcanic vents. Other rocky prominences are crowned by churches or castles. This is the very heart of France, much further from the sea than one ever is in the UK. After passing through Murat we turned off at Joursac and left the busy main road behind; north and north-east now, through gently rolling green landscape, with scattered farms and woods, very reminiscent of the English/Scottish borders, both road and landscape quiet now but very pleasant; a surprise to realise that we are at around 1000m; in England we would be on top of Scafell Pike.

Long gently sinuous descent into a big valley again at Condat, but just before turned off for a few hundred m to see the Abbaye de Féniers, once a major Cistercian house. Now a picturesque little hamlet, with a tiny chapel, traditional RC (ie cluttered) tacked onto the west end of the north aisle of the monastic church, the outer walls of which survive as ragged crags of igneous rubble, every dressed stone (clearly at a premium hereabouts) having gone. The interior was fenced off as dangerous, but could be well seen – there did not seem to be anything left of the cloister or conventual buildings, although there could have been remnants disguised in the little houses clustered around. Quite an evocative spot; interesting to note that even such a fragmentary ruin is floodlit at night. North now on better roads, with more igneous upthrusts apparent in the landscape and the distinctive Puy de Dome (with its radio mast) on the horizon; the sky clouded over, and we rode through the tail end of a storm, and survived a roadside police check.

Arrived Pontgibaud, an ancient but slightly scruffy town where we were booked in at a bikers' chambre d'hôte which advertised itself by having an old motorbike (which still looked considerably smarter than ours) fixed above its gateway, 6 m up, fronting onto a square beside the parish church and close to a fine 15th century machicolated gatehouse, now shorn of its town walls. It faces out onto the Chateau, another late medieval building, which was closed. Had a walk out, and took refuge in the church as the rain became briefly torrential; it looks 19th century, but in fact seems to be medieval (15th century?) built of the very hard local volcanic stone that stays sharp and square-edged; a predecessor fell down in an earthquake (another relic of the vulcanism; there are also hot springs in the area). There are quite a lot of medieval houses in the narrow steeply-sloping streets that lead down to the main road and bridge; once again we found one that looked very like a bastle...The chambre d'hôtes seems to be a converted school; our abode looks to have been a classroom, and we ate in what was obviously the dining hall, along with a big group of Parisian bikers (who seem friendly and civilised) and two more normal voiture-bound couples. The meal was pretty basic (what we had thought was the starter turned out to be the main course) and the vin distinctly ordinaire, but it was perfectly adequate (and at least NO DUCK); bed large and comfortable and a really interesting poster showing the local types of (extinct) volcano in the corridor outside, so no complaints

10. Monday 6th June .The Realms of Cluny

Day dawned dank and dripping, but the skies were slowly clearing. Half an hour's ride brought us to the Puy de Dome itself; there is a road all the way up, but the public may only drive to a car park 300 m below the summit. Sadly, we did not have time for the final ascent (the summit was still in cloud anyway); a new mountain railway was



due to open last year but will in fact open next. So we turned away down again. Got a good picture(left) looking back from a few km away, as the cloud did clear and the tall masts and cross on the summit appeared; there are the remains of a Roman Temple of Mercury up there – the surprise is that it never seems to have become a church of St Michael, his usual successor as Winged Messenger and lover of lofty places. We dropped from the north side of the Massif straight to a huge city, Clermont-Férrand, famous for making tyres (well it would hardly be ship-building) but escaped the conurbation by taking to the motorways and a fast hour heading east again, with the wonderful spiky horizon of the Massif still distracting

through the rear view mirrors. Then turned north and headed to Paray-le-Monail, but got diverted by roadside signs to Charlieu, promising us both a Couvent du Cordeliers (Franciscan Friary) and a Benedictine Abbey. The problem was that Monday was the day everything in Charlieu closes, so we had to make do with exteriors. The friary just outside the town to the north-west, looks largely 13th century, and seems more or less complete, with its buildings on outside the town to the north-west looks largely 13th century and seems more or less complete, with its

buildings on the north, except that the east range has been demolished leaving the chapter house, which projected beyond it, standing alone as a museum. The abbey, in the town centre, seems to have an intact cloister (not accessible to us) but the church, on the north is reduced to foundations except for its western porch-cum-transept which has fantastic door, with yet another tympanum, at its north end. At the northern corners of the precinct are tall round towers, probably the product of some later medieval fortification. For lunch all we could find open was a little kebab place; the proprietor did not seem able to understand even ELR's French, and we ended up eating things that bore no relation to what we ordered.... but passable. Very twisty road followed north, upon which we chanced upon Varenne-l'Arconce with a beautiful Romanesque church, which made us realise we were entering the realm of Cluny, the great abbey whose 11th-century rise spawned a host of daughter houses, a few even as far away as the British Isles, but most in central/eastern France. This one was a simple cruciform church with a central pyramid-roofed tower, with few of the usual signs of ever having been monastic, although the excellent interpretative material with (usually good at these 'Sites Clunisiennes') stated that monastic buildings had been destroyed in one or other of the post-medieval traumas this country underwent. Then a few more km to Paray-le-Monial itself, quite a big town, with at its heart a river and a wonderful Cluniac Basilica, said to be that nearest in architecture and form to Cluny itself. Cluny was the greatest church in Western Europe, but only small parts of it survived the Revolution; Paray is much smaller; it boasts a westwork with two towers, and a fine apsidal east end with an ambulatory, but its nave is only three bays long. A very beautiful building, quite bright within with whitewashed walls and almost yellow stone, with some fine carving on its door surrounds but most carved detail, as on the capitals, big bold and relatively simple; the usual late 11th/early 12th century elements but with some motifs – fluted pilasters, and Corinthian capitals - that to English eyes seem more Roman than Romanesque. The southern of the two west towers is slightly simpler – apparently it survives from the 11th century Paray II, whereas what we have today is Paray III. On the south is a square of early-18th century building around a very attractive cloister, with beyond that another big round tower, surviving from the late medieval abbot's house. The view from the north-west, reflected in the river (with ducks in their proper place).



Then due east into Mâcon, to meet Régine, ELR's correspondante from here school days, for the first time in 38 years. She lives in a beautiful and very French house (our bedroom was on a balcony overlooking the living room, reached by an open wooden spiral stair) and we were warmly welcomed, and taken out to a maritime-flavour restaurant; the city is built on one bank of a river, which feels very like a sea front, although the sea is really a long long way off. Mâcon retains a grid of old streets, and the odd ancient building – a tower from its walls, an elaborate timber-framed house, and the ragged west end of its 11th century cathedral with a pair of tall polygonal towers (the rest was destroyed in the Revolution; a later 19th century one was built a few blocks away); ate crepes, folded-up pancake-like things with a friend egg balefully staring out from the centre and sundry cheese and savoury items within.,

11. Tuesday 7th June The Delicate Sound of Tonnerre

Good breakfast and out into the Mâcon traffic, briefly confusing before escape north onto good road, first stop at Tournus; PFR was here last year but ELR had not seen the Cathedral. This is largely 11th century, and feels ancient. We had to wait a while as a Mass was in progress, but there was an interesting exhibition of modern icons in the chapter house. Then onto motorway, and a rapid 100 miles or so, north and then north-west (on the A6 Autoroute du Soleil) over vast swathes of very gently-rolling green countryside, big fields, woodland, only the odd village. Came off at junction 21 and north to Tonnerre, where asked at the Tourist Information centre and found a hotel just over the road which seemed reasonable, to decided to stay there for a couple of nights – so a not-very-long day after all. Had planned to go to Troyes, another 60 km north, but did not really fancy a big city on the bike, which was given its own secure abode in a locked alleyway just up the street.

Tonnerre is an interesting little town, but away from the main street scruffy and run down; lots of shops etc closed down. The Tourist Information is housed in an amazing late 13th century hospital building, quite like that which we saw last year at Beaune, erected by the philanthropic Queen Marguerite in 1293-5. It is a vast hall, now quite empty, with a chapel at its east end and an altered three-story bay at the west. The roof structure seems original, but is largely concealed by a semicircular boarded ceiling; in the western block there is however an elaborate model of it all, along with exhibitions of sundry aged religious and medical artefacts. Old plans show a lot more buildings, but only the hall survives today. Tonnerre has two churches, one largely 17th century one on the main street and one up



on the hill to the south, and also a big vauclusian spring ('Fosse Dionne') enclosed by a highly picturesque 18th century washing place; cave divers have been busy here and have got in 360 metres and to a depth of 61 metres, according to a guide leaflet. The sky was now heavy with thunder – appropriately considering the town's name – so we scurried back to our hotel before the skies opened. Set menu evening meal only 11E; porc au diable ('pork of the devil') was in fact very agreeable, as was the house wine at 3.50 E per 20cl; old-fashioned French prices. Less agreeable some insect au diable, perhaps encountered whilst perambulating the back

streets of Tonnerre, which bit both PFR and ELR, (PFR symmetrically on both wrists) barely noticed at the time but very much noticed afterwards when the bites became glowing continents of scarlet, and the irritation sleep denying....

12. Wednesday 8th June. Hunting Cistercians

Morning grey and on-and-off rainy, but this was a pause in our incessant travels and it mattered less. ELR to Lavarie automatique (laundrette); PFR attempting to sketch. The Fosse Dionne is a peculiarly evocative place and eminently sketchable, encircled by its own 18th century lavarie non-automatique and with old houses stacked up the hillside behind, topped by the dramatic church of St Pierre high above. Everywhere decay on the edge between the picturesque and the sad; there is apparently little work here, and the town centre shops are up in arms against a big new supermarket in the suburbs – all familiar stories, along with that of a government cutting public services.



In the afternoon got the bike out to pursue Cistercian abbeys, first to Pontigny about 25 km to the west. Swept across rolling hills with huge fields unbroken by any fences or walls; vines more in evidence hereabouts. Pontigny has the largest surviving Cistercian church in France, and it is huge, as long as a cathedral but without any towers or spires just a great roof of orange tiles unbroken from west end to apse. The building materials are interesting – rubble in the aisles, better squared stone for the gable ends and clerestory. From a distance it looks a low building, but it is just the



proportions; inside it is lofty, and overwhelmingly bright; the walls are whitewashed, and the exposed dressings either white stone or more likely have a thin coat of wash too. The architecture is wonderfully simple – the capitals simple foliate ones, the western tympanum with a single cross – but spoiled by the elaborate furnishings of the choir and sanctuary, the result of an 18th century enthusiasm aesthetically at odds with St Bernard's ideals from six centuries before. Much of the monastery (the buildings were, rather oddly, on the north) was rebuilt in this late phase, before the Revolution brought down the curtain and swept it away, leaving only south cloister arcade and the west range which is in fact 12th century, has been remodelled as a fashionable house and is and not open to the public. There are extensive gardens and

various outbuildings including an 18th century orangery; St Bernard did not go in for those either.

In the abbey bookshop (there is no access charge to the building itself) we learned of another Cistercian house at Quincy, 8 km east of Tonnerre, so with ominous skies advancing behind us, headed back there. This one was a total contrast, but very attractive. It looked as if we might have been the day's only visitors; the custodian seemed very pleased to see us. The site is now largely greensward with a few clumps of fine old trees and some scattered buildings; there was a plasticised sheet with pidgin English and a less-than-ideal plan, but enough to help us find our way round. The only real survival of the main claustral buildings is the south end of the east range with a vaulted 12th century undercroft, and an exhibition of architect's plans for the restoration of the buildings, which it is good to see have been well drawn and recorded. There has been a little excavation, and one can see where the lay brother's lane (parallel to the west cloister walk) met the church, with an almost-buried round arch in the nave wall. Apparently the 12th century nave was destroyed in the Wars of Religion (16th century) and never rebuilt, and the later church was a T-shaped one of transepts and eastern arm only; nothing of it is above ground. The main survival is to the west, where there is a complex and picturesque block of medieval buildings that seems to have been the

guest house, with a fine late medieval stair turret (a broad newel stair rising to a lovely umbrella vault). The interiors have clearly been used as farm buildings, and currently house an art exhibition ‘made by the young people’ we were told; enough said. To the north are other buildings and a walled court with a gateway that looks largely of the 18th century. Between the guest house and the site of the cloister is an interesting stone (brought from elsewhere) which marked the boundary between lands belonging to this abbey and another, with carved crosiers and other distinguishing symbols on either side.

Back to Tonnerre, and PFR managed another hour of sketching before dinner. Another night of itching.

13. Thursday 9th June The Fields of the Dead

The hotel in Tonnerre provides the most basic of continental breakfasts; a hot milky drink and two bits of bread, one hard and one soft, to have either orange or red sticky jam on; c’est tout. Exhumed bike from its narrow yard, found garage and filled up – just short of 60mpg now it is mostly top gear work, but, really, the car would have been cheaper (especially as diesel is much less than petrol here).

Today is north, north and a little east. Easy roads. Just before we hit the motorway, after 30 km or so, distracted by one of those roadside signs to a church ‘of the three sanctuaries’ at Isle-Aumont. It was not open, but there were directions to a nearby house, from whence sallied an elderly lady to give us a guided tour. What looked an ordinary village church turned into an archaeological spectacular, largely thanks to a local guy, Jean Scapula (1911-1991), who had devoted his life to excavation here. Everything from the Neolithic onwards, including Druids, but it was in the Merovingian and Carolingian eras that this little hilltop became really important, with vast cemeteries including hundreds of stone sarcophagi. A selection of the best examples are now in the church into the church where the ‘three sanctuaries’ are a 10th century one (short nave and apsidal chancel exhumed beneath floor), the 12th century (nave, tower and chancel) and the 16th century (whole parallel Gothic church added on south). The guidebook for once gave a good phased plan – although PFR wondered whether north nave wall might be older as both its simple arcade and the large unplayed round-arched windows above looked earlier than the typical Romanesque apse. Other treasures within, from Merovingian grave markers to a 16th century Virgin carved in stone with literally microscopic detail in the folds and ornamentation of her robe, amazing craftsmanship. In the 12th century the church had served a small Benedictine Priory, and Mr Scapula had re-created its cloister, as low walls, on the north of the church; north again was a fortified house, some part of which survives in a modern residence.

Then onto motorway, and 70 fast miles, dodging east just north of Chalons onto another motorway (A4) for a couple of junctions, then a long way north on fast ordinary road. Gently rolling terrain, huge fields, and amazingly distant views – and war cemeteries showing that these were Killing Fields of the Great War, later World War I. In an odd way maybe a good place to come to die, because with all that sky God was bound to see you. Names on signposts were vaguely familiar, for PFR through the rather circuitous route of the names of steam engines (from early trainspotting days) which in turn had been named after battles which in turn were named after villages. The battles probably did not leave much of the villages, as the present ones (such as they were, and they were only occasional) seemed a bit newer and shinier than most, post-1918 in fact. All this immense carnage because of the territorial ambitions of one country and a fall-out in the family of Our Own Dear Queen. Almost a century of time has made Kaiser Bill into a figure of fun, eclipsed by the sheer demonism of Hitler. Stopped in Suippes and ate a bunny.

We are now in the Ardennes, an area of woodland, lakes, and low hills, shared between north-eastern France and the south-eastern tip of Belgium. At Poix-Terron diverted east into a maze of tiny roads to find a Cistercian Abbey at Elan, in quite remote wooded country; a website declared that the remains were open but all that was open was an information centre. Not much left- a little church (now too unsafe to enter) formed out of the western bays of the abbey nave (blocked arcades visible in the side walls) and, privée but just glimpsable, a fragment of the east wall of the frater (in the usual Cistercian position at right angles to the cloister) with a couple of lancets and, just to the east again, a late abbot’s house, a rectangular block with a conical-roofed round tower at each corner. The information centre did however direct us to another monastic site, another 10 km south, at La Cassine, a Franciscan Friary founded 1585. The buildings are intact but much altered when converted into a farm after the Revolution. Long narrow church with three-sided east end, with late Gothic windows with the simple uncusped tracery reminiscent of some in Scotland and Ireland, cloister ranges with weathering for roof of a conventional cloister walk (now gone) but few old, or at least medieval-looking features. At the south-west corner rooms with a big fireplace and a bread oven, in use every third Saturday when there is a farmers’ market there; folk around were preparing for the son et lumiere held there on summer Saturdays.

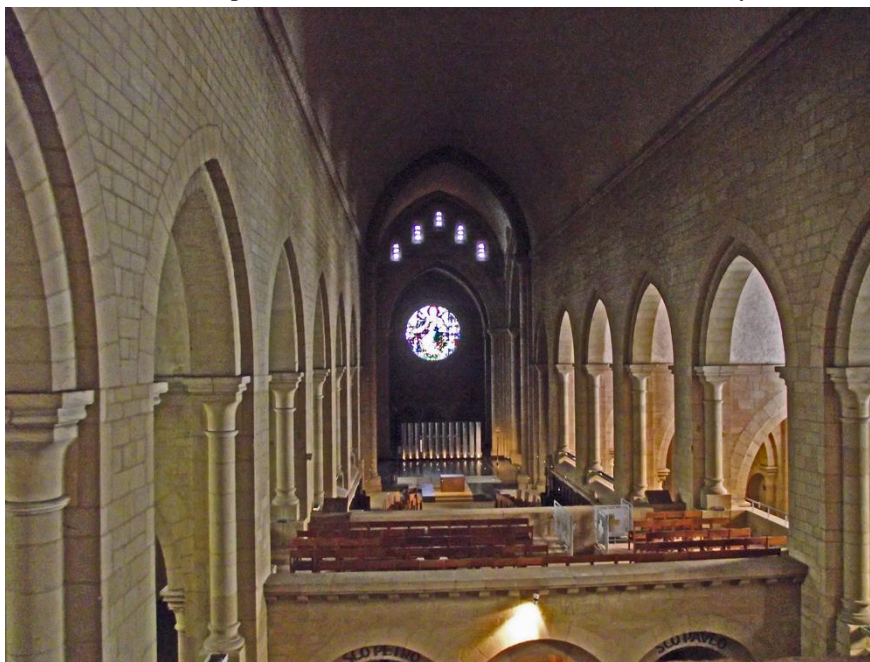
Set satnav, who is a bit flighty and prone to aberrations out here, for Charleville-Mezieres, the city where we were booked into a hotel – plan had been to visit a former exchange student who had stayed with us twenty years ago, and now lives here, but for the last few days we can only get his answerphone. We are in Charleville, the more modern of the two halves of the town (or two conjoined towns). Decent evening meal; although we are on main street, both slept and woke to the carolling blackbird. Bike safe in back yard, although this does smell of raw sewage.

14. Friday 10th June. Belgium: the Silent Brewers, and a Nightmare

Belgium, in a word – no, two words. Why? and Don't. This is perhaps a little unfair, and an illiberal judgement based on a single day's experience, so let us temper it. There are some good bits round the edges.

Anyway, to get started. Over the northern border of France (which continues a good bit further east into Alsace Lorraine, which we never got into) into the bottom south-east corner of Belgium; only a little sign by the road and an abandoned customs post, half an hour's ride east of Charleville. Just beyond was the Abbey of Orval, which is really quite a remarkable place, prompting a lot of thought... Today it is a vast establishment, a city in itself, set in a quiet wooded valley. The present buildings, in a style somewhere between Romanesque and Art Deco, were built in the 1920s and house a community of Trappist monks. The reason we had come was to see the ruins of its medieval Cistercian predecessor, which still exist in its grounds. SE gets one access, not only to the ruins but to a whole series of exhibitions dealing with whole continuing story of Orval, and allows one a (very restricted) glimpse of the modern abbey, although of course you never as much as see a monk. The interface between the world of the modern tourist and this world-denying community is a strange one, but very professionally presented.

The old abbey first. The monks apparently took over an early hermitage (archaeologists have found foundations of its church, a rectangle with three equal apses at the east end, under the later one). Their abbey was of the familiar form, and quite a lot of the eastern part of its church stands. The cloister, on the south, has a good chapter house on the east and a south range that was partly rebuilt in the 17th century to house a library where the frater had been. The monks' choir has some interesting acoustic channels, complete with earthenware pipes, beneath where the stalls stood, to act as sounding boxes and amplify the singing – there are remains of similar ones at Whalley in Lancashire. The gable end of the north transept has a fine cusped circular window. Quite a lot else has been re-erected in the 20th century, including it would appear the whole east gable of the choir (there are the lower parts of a later polygonal apse, and external ambulatory, beyond). Old photographs show the ruins considerably more ruined, as it were. Set at an angle to the south is the huge modern church, with a towering belfry and an immense statue of Virgin and Child as the centrepiece of its west end. What one sees externally is all of the 1920s, but in fact it stands on the



footprint of an 18th century predecessor, built only a decade or two before the Revolution (this was then France) brought its brutal end to the original Cistercian community. This church was raised on a huge warren of cellars and passages, which remain, and house a whole series of exhibitions. Visitors are allowed (in silence) to enter the west end of the modern church (left); it feels a lot gloomier than medieval Cistercian churches like Pontigny, although like them a vast and impressive space. Outside there is a little viewing turret from which visitors may look through a window into the vast outer court of the Abbey, but again, not a human being in site.

So what do the invisible monks do? For a start, they brew beer. The exhibitions make much of this; they use the water of the spring beside the west end of the old church, the reason for the original choice of site. Work is prayer

(labore est orare) is their dictum. Their beer is said to be very good indeed; we are told the medieval monks brewed it to give to beggars, but there do not appear to be free samples for visitors (and PFR was driving anyway). To one with a Salvation Army upbringing this comes as a bit of a shock; in the early days of the Army it was the brewers, publicans (and sometimes Anglican clergy) who were the opponents of the Kingdom. Drink was a demon; but here in this quiet valley it is manufactured by silent and holy men. Different cultures may be the answer here; perhaps Belgians do not get drunk, and there is no moral issue (although in England the same problem has been raised by the fortified wine produced by the Benedictine monks of Buckfast in Devon, which has proven dangerously popular as a means for local teenagers to get off their heads; ‘eh I’m right buckfasted...’)

But there is something else as well, which seeps in on reflection a few hours are visiting Orval. We both come from a Protestant religious background which had little truck with monasticism; now, with a middle-aged tolerance and broadening of outlook, we approach such Catholic things in a new light, wary of judging. But in all honesty there feels (to PFR at least) something strange here, and it is not just the beer. An unseen totally-male community, shut away from the world and all women save the Virgin Mary yet living in an oddly sensual (?is that the word) of art, rich vestments and statuary, some of which (the bronzes dotted around the old ruins) looked to have, err, questionable overtones. What is the real mix of emotions and impulses brewing silently (sorry!) in that invisible community. Does it really matter? Give up, I’m going for breakfast. .

The Grim Bit...

Left Orval and headed north over the Ardennes – pleasant wooded countryside and some good valley scenery, with a bit of a feel of the Welsh borders, but nothing anywhere near as dramatic as the Pyrenees and limestone areas further south. Then hit a main road, soon motorway, north; Satnav said we should arrive in Bruges at around 1700 hours. This was not to be; weather and driving conditions in general began to deteriorate. Belgium has too many drivers, many of them bad; most were on the Brussels ring road, which was down to walking pace. PFR could not cope with this (too much hip pain) so escaped into the southern suburbs, just as it started to rain. Found a fairly scruffy and noisy pub, and drank coffee as the rain became stair rods, which continued for two hours.... Eventually it faired up, and set off again, back to the wretched ring road, which was barely any better. Shuffled round, then faster going when we got round the city – however, then the sun came out, low on the horizon and straight in line with the road, which made riding very difficult indeed, especially as the three lanes of traffic kept suddenly slowing down to walking pace. Eventually everything seized up about 20 miles short of Bruges, so turned off and trusted satnav, on little roads through pleasant countryside and villages, although the roads themselves are distinctly dodgy, part concrete and part holes where concrete ought to be. In one village a Belgian driver tried to kill us; reprimanded him (Belgians usually understand English). Arrived weary in Bruges five hours late, too late for any food except a takeaway cheeseburger and chips (with mayonnaise, oh dear), the city ahum with hedonistic young experiencing nightlife. Hotel seems decent, bike in garage at back.

15. Saturday 10th June Bruged but unbeaten

Bruges is a beautiful old city, retaining an immense number of 16th and 17th century brick houses, with stepped gables to the street as well as some really impressive public buildings and three huge towers – the Belfry, the tower and spire of St Mary’s Church (1120m – 400 feet – higher than anything medieval in England) and the partly-Romanesque tower of St Saviour’s Cathedral. We looked at ascending the Belfry (PFR has been up before, with Megan a few years ago) but it was 8E and there are an awful lot of steps (right)... so went a boat ride instead, on the canals, which was a bit cheaper and very pleasant even with the boatman’s trilingual banter. There are museums everywhere – a chocolate museum, well maybe (there is a lot of chocolate round here; seams are mined locally) but one fine medieval building utilised as a Chip Museum seemed to



be an exercise in bucket scraping. The place is of course heaving with tourists; we went into St Mary's Church, a big structure with five parallel aisles, 13th century in origin, but it was more museum than church and awash with gawpers and snappers. Especially interesting were 13th and 14th century brick tombs with wall paintings on the inside; were these to edify and educate the inmates during the first minutes of resurrection, and remind them whom they had booked their ticket with? Huge 16th and 17th century altar pieces by Flemish masters can, in the end, get a bit much. The back streets in the northern part of the city were quieter, and very pretty in parts, the canals alive with swans and cygnets.

Sunshine and showers alternated. Had a final cup of tea and left at 1600; fifteen easy but breezy minutes ride took us to Zeebrugge (Sea Bruge) and the ferry. Waiting queue of bikers (but far fewer than on the way out), mostly shaven-headed guys with tattoos and the odd female clad in proper leathers and that slightly worn wench-of-the-world look, average age around a half century. Big powerful shiny bikes, did not speak to us. Boarded 16.30 but had to wait until 1900 for departure; clear skies and calm seas. Two hours out passed a huge windfarm; how do they anchor these things to the sea bed, or are we in shallow waters? Buffet dinner, 'as much as you can eat' for £18.00 (into the domain of Sterling). Is this wise? PFR had a half bottle of sleepy juice. 'As much as you can eat' is something of a deceit; there are lots of ferry minions who stand around, forever asking you 'are you enjoying your food?' but their real task is to snatch your plate from you before you get a chance to refill it. Still, comfortably full – but what if a force eight north-easter blows up, will it all come back to haunt us? This is an old familiar ferry, not a floating city like the Plymouth to Santander one; zombie music in the bar ('live' but not life as we recognise it; ferries are where live music goes to die). 21.50 sun slipped behind horizon cloud then popped out again beneath, an incandescent blood orange; PFR on deck to bid it adieu, and then to our bunks.

16. Sunday 11th June Hull and High Water

Slept OK, main problem being that geriatric ferry shook and rattled, but did not roll; the movements were due to its engines (were their big ends going?) rather than the ocean, which was at peace. Last night's repast, chicken tikka massala, cheese cake, Cornish ice cream and all, thankfully stayed where it was put, dutifully obeying gravity. The bill for it all was pushed under our door in the early hours – P&O ferries have surprisingly large gaps under the cabin doors (almost large enough to make one consider stuffing loose clothing under it to prevent people lying down in the corridor and peeping inside) presumably so their staff can deliver really thick wads of bills to remind one of the excesses of the previous evening. The Tannoy lady called us all at 0700; PFR surfaced into brilliant sunshine to find the ship was ploughing its way through the murky waters of Humber, with all the surreal beauty of the chemical industries on the south bank, and more distant flatlands on the north with the familiar spire of Patrington – and beyond that, to the north-west, the low and hazy line of the WOLDS! The old East Riding, we lived in it once! And ahead of us, the great and golden metropolis of HULL lies awaiting our disembarkation on this bright Pentecost morning.

It took a while to get off the ferry – or rather, to get out of the terminal, as the authorities made the bikers wait until last, behind a queue of caravans. However, after 45 min we got away into a warren of roundabouts (on average about 5 per mile) before getting to Beverley Minster in time for an excellent Pentecost service; warmly welcomed. After this, sadly, things went downhill. Getting out of Beverley was a problem – there were roadworks, and the only exit from the whole centre of the town was via a traffic light at North Bar, the result a long slow queue. Then it started to rain.... Bought sandwiches in the Services at Boroughbridge, ate them with friends in Ripon, then went to meet an archaeologist at Hornby Castle, who did not turn up; found the dig PFR was to inspect but it was covered in with plastic sheeting, and swiftly becoming a pool in the pouring rain. It went on getting grimmer; waterproofs no longer were, and progress on the last lap of A68 was slowed first by a queue of vintage cars spluttering through the downpour at 25mph, and finally by horseboxes. Home 18.15, soggy and weary but grateful to be still extant, to find cats, traumatised by an unwelcome visiting tom, had rescheduled our bedroom as a litter tray.....