

The Bretonic Wanderings of an Antiquary and Wife

Sunday 28 September 2008

A sunny day, rare after the grey and monsoonal summer. After due preparations left just after noon; 15 miles south on the A68 realised we had no bike legalities, so turned round, got stuck in long queue behind tractor etc, first panic set in... however had left enough time, second leaving just on one, this time avoided the hill country and tractors, going into Newcastle and down the A19 at a steady 70, to a two-for-the-price-of-one eaterie on the York ring road – decent fodder, considering – then the straight road south-east over the green rampart of the Wolds to Hull's flatlands and following the signs to the ferry round a hundred roundabouts through endless industrial estates. Onto the ferry with barely a stop, and we were gliding out of dock three quarters of an hour before the announced departure time, the Humber Bridge silhouetted against the dying embers of the day on the western horizon. Night falls fast as it does this time of year; soon there were just the orange lights of the southern shore and the flaring chimneys of the north-bank oil refineries, then the lesser lights of Spurn, out-to-sea red twinkles we took to be wind turbines, the little glimmering white beacons marking our sea lane and then nothing but the North Sea.

We had the cheapest and most compact of ferry cabins, L-shaped around a two bunks and a toilet-cum-shower; sit on the loo and turn the handle alongside – flush? no, descending water all around. This is the shower; loo flush is concealed behind the seat. Typical French design – well, the ferry was Belgian (and made in Japan) but contrary devices like this have just got to be French. Wet and peeved.

The ferry was almost empty bar a big pack of adolescent French schoolkids, endlessly circulating and being loud, on the uneasy threshold between excited children and young grownups. Where had they been? On an exchange spending a fortnight absorbing the cultural riches of Hull? Then they could be forgiven most things.

Cabin stuffy and the ocean flat; just the regular shudder of the engines, no gentle swell to roll one to sleep on the bosom of the deep. Up the see the first glimmer of dawn behind a row of turbines; they are building these things in the middle of the sea now. Do they float, or are they rooted down on the ocean floor?

Docked on time. Unbound bike, which had been stabled alongside a huge BMW, riders of which would deign to acknowledge our presence; brought to mind a remote Scottish ferry crossing I once shared with a troupe of posh Ducati riders in designer gear who made it very clear that as the owner of a mere Honda 125 I had no right even to existence. Out onto Belgian soil (or rather concrete) and, surprise surprise, it started to rain just like last year. Thankfully, the rain was fitful, and never got through our gear. The Satnav worked fine, and we were soon on the motorway heading for France; a couple of stops at services, the sky brightened, and by mid afternoon we were 200 miles down and crossing the Pont de Normandie which manages to be huge and graceful. It was another 50 miles before we located an antiquity – **Beaumont en Auge**, a Benedictine Abbey Church which had lost its nave, bar a couple of arches built up into a house, with the 18th century west range of its claustral buildings (on the north) and other medieval bits on north and west of the outer court. Then decided we needed fuel again (first tankful managed 68 mpg on 60ish riding, second low 60s as the afternoon sunshine prompted more cruising in the 70s) and went back to Pont l'Evac, the start of a frustrating chapter of getting lost. At a key moment in multiple lanes and heavy traffic (the Pont l'Evac rush hour) got stuck in the wrong lane and had no escape from getting back on the motorway the wrong way (east) and fifteen miles before we could turn round – so that was thirty extra; then going south towards Falaise there were travaux; the

diversion signs and satnav disagreed, and so did we. Stiff and saddle sore, went past the architectural delights of St Pierre sur Dives without even stopping; it was gone seven and dusk when we arrived at our Ibis Hotel in **Falaise**.

Twenty minutes walk down into the attractive old town. William the Conqueror was born here; we did the chateau a few years ago, but there are town walls as well and a lovely part-Romanesque church in the centre. Found food, not over inspired; 'it would have taken too long to cook the salmon'; a demi of vin rouge defeated PFR, despite his reluctance to leave anything he had paid for.

Tuesday 30 September

The girl at the hotel desk simply replied 'non' when asked whether the weather forecast was good; drizzle set in as we headed west and south, putting our trust in Ms Satnav after keying in 'Cressy Belle Etoile' – the village near '**Ancienne Abbaye Belle Etoile**'; only a name on the map but it sounded good, 'abbey of the beautiful star'. The abbey was at the end of a twisting gravelly hill road; lots of wires and locked gates but no sign of present humanity; an unkempt jungle of ruins and later buildings but there was clearly a church with its blocked west door facing the road and a roofed west range, the full width of which was occupied by a broad cloister walk one could glimpse through little windows. There had clearly been an outer court to the north, with various other old buildings including a fine barn alongside the road, which seemed to have a complete internal timber frame despite having a substantial stone exterior. Then more wooded country to a second abbey, '**Abbaye Blanche**', which turned out to be still functional; a huge 18th-century block rather like a giant mill building replaced the old east range, but the 12th-century church – cruciform, square ended, aisleless nave – was intact along with the cloister arcade (granite, and very like that at La Granitiere) alongside and a range extending west in line with the church (it turns out we had been here before in 1999, and I had almost forgotten).

The drizzle eased and we headed east, suddenly onto much faster straight roads, with the amazing Mont St Michel rearing on the distant horizon far ahead, but we were to turn left (south) on the motorway, after a brief lunch in the 'Bar Clapton' (how many English bars are named after French rock guitarists?). Then it was steady 70mph on dry motorway, just the odd lorry to pass every two or three miles, with a brief slower bit after the Rennes ring road. Filled up with fuel 25m short of Vannes (consumption down to upper 50s, the price of speed), and arrived at our hotel 1540.

Left in Vannes rush hour to meet up with the brother of a friend, who has lived here for many years and is an expert on the prehistoric monument of the **Carnac** area, which we knew of but did not know much about. What to say in a few words? Frankly, the whole place is wonderful and a bit scary. Factually, there are a whole series of 'alignments', parallel rows of stones, various dolmens (burial chambers with huge capstones carried on rings of uprights) and more esoteric things like a rectangular stone circle; the major concentration of monuments occupies an area c 30 by 10 km, along the coast.. Who erected them? well, that is the easiest, people we call 'Neolithic', around 4-5000 BC (so a couple of millennia before our own Stonehenge). Why? the sun, moon and solstices were clearly important. Howard is very keen on 3/4/5 triangles and ropes knotted into 12 equal divisions, and the fact that this geometry only works specifically at this latitude. How? here credible answers start to run out; they reckon the land hereabouts could only have supported a population of c150, whereas immense manpower is clearly called for.....

Howard is not quite a straight archaeologist (in fact he has been asked to give a talk at Glastonbury, which would ring alarm bells with any straight archaeologist) but there is just too much strangeness here for traditional textbook answers. The stones themselves are wonderful, rearing up grey and

lichened along hedges and amongst ancient gnarled trees, not sanitised or tidied at all. They are still under threat; there are folk on the local council who would like to dynamite them... until very recently there was no planning permission and people could build houses where they wanted. Unlike England, where there had a king's antiquary in the 16th century and positively droves of learned gentlemen seeking the old and romantic by the 18th and early 19th century, this is deep and backwoods Brittany and the stones were only noticed at the end of the 19th century, by which time they were being enthusiastically quarried (to provide material for lighthouse building, among other things) or simply felled and buried to 'improve' the land.

It's all too much. Stack the questions on a mental shelf, close the cupboard door; we were given an excellent meal, then sped the 20 m back to Vannes on quiet roads. Had to leave the bike on the street outside the hotel (we had been told there would be someone on duty to open the garage for us, but all was dark and silent) but it survived the night unscathed.

Wednesday 1st October

More Stones

The weather forecast in the paper showed rain and said 'Bon Vent', meaning windy, but once again it turned out pretty good. A couple of short showers as we walked round **Vannes** in the morning. It has quite a lot of its town walls (the east side complete, with attractive gardens laid out beneath), lots of late medieval houses with stone ground floors and framing above and a medium-sized Cathedral which is a bit of a jumble with the usual gloomy interior. One side chapel had a wonderful waxwork model of a 19th century robed ecclesiastic recumbent in what looked like an illuminated fish tank beneath the altar; also the usual gold boxes housing bits of dead holy people. Displayed around the apse a set of (modern) coloured charts covering all of Christian history, very sportingly including lots of reformers and even Lord Nelson.

Elevenish back to the hotel and took to the bike, west for a second time to megalith land. Fed at Carnac; tried to go to the Museum of Prehistory but it would not let us in because it was closing for lunch in forty minutes! Rode the length of the alignments instead, and found a very medieval-looking round tower which was clearly built to view them from. The rows of stones are anything but straight. If the ancients were as technologically-advanced as some of us are now thinking, surely they could have put their stones in a straight line? Or did they choose to let the rows meander either for some obscure esoteric reasons, or for the sake of art? Then to the **Tumulus de Kercado**, under a mound with a little menhir on the top and a ring of stones round the outside. A dim electric light lets one see the interior, where there are some incised patterns but they were not very exciting. Satnavved to **Locmariaquer** and more monuments (pay to get in this time). The **Grand Menhir Brise** would have been 20 m high – the biggest of them all - but lies recumbent and broken into four pieces. When it broke one fell one way and three (or one, shortly before becoming three) the other; last night Howard had told us that the initial break cuts straight across the grain of the stone (orthogneiss he said, though the guide here said granite), the implication being that something very unusual happened. Earthquake? Lightning strike? Or were the erectors using some mysterious powers which for once badly malfunctioned? Archaeologists have shown that the menhir was only one of a row of twenty or so, but the rest have gone. A few metres away a tumulus with a burial chamber focussed on a big carved boulder, this time really impressive.

More Thoughts on Stones

Whatever one's world view, stones like this do have a power, and set the mind a-questioning. What is the lure, the fascination? It is more than simply antiquarian interest. Here is one menhir-prompted cogitation. Perhaps everyone, whether they claim faith or not, has a natural tendency to pull together their own religion, to assemble elements into a whole which may work to their own advantage to help them get what they want, be it power, prestige or comfort. Even a cursory familiarisation with places like Carnak suggests that their builders had knowledge or powers that we have now lost, something all or science and technology still cannot explain; there seems to be something here to make the rationalists quail. Maybe something that we can still rediscover, maybe there is a key still lying around that would unlock this door.... Then we would have knowledge, maybe even power – and gain prestige among our peers, all good things for one assembling a functional personal religion.

Then we set all this stuff against established religions, which claim specific revelation. Something happened, a message was given – it is not something we cobble together ourselves. Those of us who subscribe to one of these often find it in conflict with the other one which we are busy manufacturing. For instance, Jesus Christ does not seem to have had much time for architecture, to judge from his one comment when his disciples were trying to impress him with the Jerusalem Temple. It won't last, it will end up flat (and it did) – yet his followers do not give up on building cathedrals. I like cathedrals – but if I am a Christian I need to keep Christ's words in mind, as I do with other perhaps more idiosyncratic elements in my personal hotch potch of views and opinions. For instance, I am tempted by the ancient Egyptian veneration of cats: I could readily believe that cats (well, some cats) are, well, more than just cats. So do I formulate my own customised faith ('Christianity-and-Cats')?. A lot of people do; a lot of groups do as well, but do not have the honesty to spell out the additional elements. I recall an elderly gentleman in Corbridge (from the local Brethren assembly) trying to evangelise me on the street; I responded that I was a Christian but he clearly did not believe this; what was my opinion on a certain verse in Paul's letter to the Romans? Ah, that would sort me out!

St Anne and Auray

Getting hot and sticky in the bike gear, pottered north to **Auray**; in Vannes we had seen posters for an exhibition of aerial photographs of monasteries, which we thought was in St Anne's Church here. Parked up, had a coffee, enquired – then realised that **St Anne d'Auray** is a different place, another five km up the valley.

St Anne d'Auray is, after Lourdes, France's prime pilgrimage site. St Anne beamed down here in the 17th century, and asked for a church; there is now a huge 19th-century basilica, alongside the attractive cloister of its 17th-century predecessor, its walls covered in inscribed tiles thanking Anne for her (positive) intervention in such things as examination results and car crashes. The cloister has a gallery above, and this is where the exhibition was. The photographs were superb – monasteries all over the world (not all Christian) – but the only English one was allegedly Westminster Abbey, whereas the picture was of the Houses of Parliament (with just a little of the abbey bottom right).

Outside was a great paved area and a raised pavilion, backed by a stained glass window, where Mass could be celebrated before thousands. St Anne was the mother of the Virgin Mary, but does not actually get a mention in the Bible.

Quimper, our destination, was still sixty miles west, so blasted off along a busy motorway, often between hedges and trees through surprisingly anonymous countryside. There were occasional industrial estates as we rounded towns; eventually sliproaded off, and Ms Satnav took us to our hotel, which was in just such an estate. 'A stone's throw from the historic town centre' said the advert – the

stone needs to be thrown a good two-and-a-half miles it turns out. Perhaps they were assuming that by now we had assimilated some ancient Bretonic menhir-projection system; we hadn't. The hotel consists of a series of open galleries, thronged with French lorry drivers gathering for a smoke and noisy Gallic conversation, with individual rooms opening off them. Only eating place in view a huge structure labelled 'Buffalo Grill', which seemed to offer nothing but buffalo in various culinary disguises.

Walked down into town, through parks, housing estates, and cycle tracks; bright sun when we started, late dusk when we arrived. Circambulated another cathedral and streets of old framed houses, then quested for food, a bit of a struggle, but ended up in an Indian restaurant in a seedy area near the station. However, the meal (and the music playing) was really really good; Lamb Madras cannot come any better than this. High-speed taxi back to the industrial estate, bed.

Thursday 2nd October. Wild in the West

By the time we emerged all the lorry drivers had gone; a petit déjeuner concomitant with the cheapness (33E) of our accommodation and we were away north, through landscapes slowly becoming more varied. the first port of call was **Landévennec**, quite a complex diversion along wooded roads beside what I suppose is a ria (flooded valley). Ms Satnav tried to lure us down a rough gravel track but we resisted and did an extra 8 m or so before dropping down to the market square of this quiet village, parked bike and walked downhill again to the Abbey. It is officially closed after September, but we range the bell and madame was perfectly happy to open up for us. A fascinating place; Revolution vicissitudes left little more than the lower outer walls of the church (short east end with three radiating apsidal chapels) and 18th-century east range but some serious archaeology has been carried out and disinterred four successive abbeys, not counting the first settlement by St Guénolé (who came over from Wales) in the 5th century. There was a first stone church, then a Carolingian monastery (with cloister), the Romanesque monastery (parts of church still standing) and then 15th and 18th century rebuilds of cloister and buildings. All this means lots of holes in the ground with foundations becoming mossed and lichened, with raised wooden walkways and complicated plans on interpretative panels, a bit confusing, but there is a splendid modern museum with lots of models and well-displayed material including an assortment of carved capitals.

After a not-terribly-satisfying crepe at a cafe in the square, half an hour ride to **Daoulas**, another early monastic site, although there was nothing to see from before the 12th century. The church (now the parish church) at first sight looks an unaltered Romanesque one, but closer inspection shows that only the nave walls are ancient, the rest is 19th-century rebuild on the original ground plan, ignoring the wider aisles and aisled eastern arm that the later Middle Ages had given it. On the north is a delightful Romanesque cloister with a very fine carved lavabo still a-trickling, but little else of the buildings. The later 16th century has left a remarkable free-standing porch to the churchyard, with a riot of carving, and a separate Chapel of St Anne to the south-east.

On again, north across a long bridge then west around the outskirts of Brest – heavy traffic even in the early afternoon, and endless traffic lights and roundabouts. The sky darkened ominously and we stopped for ten minutes in one heavy squally showers. Ahead was the furthest west, the very end of Brittany at **Pointe St Mathieu**. We got there just as the heavens opened again, and at last Brittany lived up to our expectations. A bleak headland, the wind-blasted ruin of a great abbey church flanked by two lighthouses (think Whitby, think Tynemouth), a huddle of tourists claiming what shelter the remaining vaults over crossing and choir could afford. One of them, English of course, moaned 'when you have seen one abbey you have seen them all'. Man, you are utterly wrong, I have seen a thousand and still it is not enough.

Not much more than the church survives of the medieval monastery, which was fortified (against the English of course). The nave has a very narrow north aisle (the cloister side) and two parallel south ones; lofty crossing, transepts and choir, then a lower sanctuary largely removed to make room for one of the lighthouses. Prior to the erection of this in the early 19th century a medieval tower attached to the north side of the choir had served as a lighthouse; its upper part had to be removed so as not to obstruct the beam of its successor.

(The Bretons are into lighthouses in a big way; everywhere are dramatic photographs of waves breaking over them; you can buy postcards with cartoons of anthropomorphised lighthouses dancing and doing all sorts of jolly things..)

The cloister was on the north; all that is visible is the outer wall of the west range, said to have half the dorter. Immediately south-east of the church are the lower course of another north-south range, the domestic accommodation of an 18th century Maurist re-foundation. East again is the parish church, largely post-medieval except for a fine Gothic portal, now detached, said to have given access to a former north transept. We cowered in here whilst the wind howled and rain lashed down, and put 5E in a guide-book-dispensing machine, only to find the guide was all words (French ones at that). Elaine can read it to me.

Took refuge in a bar, had tea and one of those egg-custard-and-date slices popular here, OK if you spit out the dates and their immediate contaminated areas of custard.

Then, hurrah, the sun came out again, allowing wonderful views of a seascape studded with distant islands (and more lighthouses). Devised a cunning route to avoid Brest, and, with the help of Ms S, followed it pretty well. One last call on our way to Morlaix was at **Guimiliau**, celebrated for its parish close. Parish choses are a distinctively Breton thing, and consist of an assemblage of monuments around the church, including a gateway, calvary, ossuary and funeral chapel. Everything here seems late 16th or 17th century, and adorned with elaborate carving in a robust vernacular style; the folks seem to have carved as if their souls depended on it, and they were clearly concerned for their souls' welfare. The Calvary has a central Crucifixion, but below it, facing all four directions, lots of scenes from the life of Christ, mixed with the odd local legend; the Last Supper is juxtaposed with the demonic torments of Catell-Gollet (Lost Catherine). Have a look at what is happening to her, people, and behave! or you will end us just like that. Strong medicine. The broad and spreading church is full of carving as well, on both wood and stone, painted retables (altar pieces), oak baptistery and a huge ornamented organ loft carved by an Englishman who moved here, failing to find a market for huge ornamented organ lofts amongst the Puritans at home. Back outside there is a funerary chapel (dated 1648) which incorporates an external pulpit (as some medieval charnel chapels did in England, cf Winchester) where clerics would obviously preach about death), and, tacked onto the south-east corner of the church, a quatrefoil-plan sacristy of 1683.

I know it is impossible to judge, over the gulf of culture and time, but what idea of God did all these carvings portray to generations of wide-eyed Breton children who gazed on them; did they fuel both dreams and nightmares? They are both wonderful and still just a little scary, and now we are at a safe distance, now (in our heads) we know much better, now we see more clearly, well, don't we?...

One last rush down busy dual carriageway and we were at **Morlaix**, an old town deep in a valley, beneath the arches of a towering railway viaduct, floodlit and impressive at night. The hotel was right in the middle of town, very posh; Elaine had booked over the phone, and thought the tariff was 40E –

but the notice on the room door said 100E! Panic. Negotiation. Madame was the model of compromise, 70E? fine. It was infinitely better than our previous industrial estate lodgings; big fat mouldings round the doors so you could even believe you were in France.

Evening walk, found a creperie; as I was carrying a Michelin guide we got free drinks! Crepe this time fine.

Friday 3rd October.

Dawn bath; proper bathroom (it even has its own balcony), but why do French baths not have plugs? Instead one is faced with a bewildering device (a bit like the dashboard of a Citroen) which runs hot or cold water, switches between shower or tap operations, and (allegedly) lifts or depresses the plug. Only, for early-morning mind and early-morning fingers it is never quite clear which bit does which.

This is the day that thunderstorms are forecast; nevertheless the sun is shining, but it is breezy and quite chilly. Walked round Morlaix; interesting late medieval parish church right beside the viaduct, with a poster advertising an Alpha Course at the Temple Protestant. Frustrated at the local museum, housed in the **Convent du Jacobins**, a medieval friary – the church is no longer open, just an art exhibition in a later cloister range. Walked round the outside, found a photographer who put my 370 photos so far onto a DVD, a coffee and departed.

Scenic ride round a bit of coast; broad bays and the tide out so the lines of white breakers were far out across the white sand; found our way to **La Yaudet**, a village on a narrow promontory celebrated for having a statue of a recumbent Virgin, but she was locked up inside the church. Around the church were some wonderful vernacular buildings with round-arched doorways, one of which looked exactly like an Allendale bastle; took its picture and will fool people at lectures, to demonstrate that different cultures and circumstances can at times produce near-identical buildings.

East again to **Tréguier**, a pleasant town with lots of old buildings and a cathedral in its square, notable for having a row of three towers, one over the crossing and one at the end of each transept. The smallest northern tower is the oldest, the only relic of the 11th/12th century building, the tallest southern one is topped by a lofty but rather naff spire, said to be 18th century but its pierced ornament is said by the guidebook to be based on playing card motifs, as its restoration was funded by a national lottery.... yes, really. Most of the building is 14th/15th century Gothic, and there is a big cloister to the north-east; quite a lot of old monuments, including half a dozen cross slabs, but mostly very worn.

Lunched in a medieval restaurant, shouldered doorway and windows to the street and a circular oak spiral stair in a rear turret – all stone, although there is plenty of old timber framing around as well (with thick stone party walls as a defence against fire). Then on again along the Paimpol road, to **L'Abbaye de Beauport**. The books said this closed at the end of September, so was steered to the prospect of exterior view only, but happily this was not so, it was now open all the year round. Very wonderful it proved, and intensely picturesque in the afternoon sunshine – a Premonstratensian house with, for once in France, the claustral buildings well preserved although the church was reduced to the shell of nave and north transept. The cloister was on the north (this seems to happen more here than in England – hotter climate, shadow more of a blessing than sun?). The upper floors of east and west ranges, and of the 'Maison au Duc', a big block extending east from the end of the east range, had been remodelled in the 17th or 18th century and were not open, but the lower levels were unaltered, and include a fine apsidal vaulted chapter house. The 'Maison au Duc' had a big rib-vaulted round-floor room, and a drain/tunnel in its thick north wall, but seems too big to have just been a *chambre*; might

it have included the infirmary as well? Also good pillared vaults to the west range and frater, as well as a kitchen block close to the west end of the latter.

Left satisfied; set Ms Satnav for **St Bruic** and trusted her for a rather surprising diversion through woodland and narrow roads with rather dodgy surfaces, but this led through to fast modern roads again, and eventually she took us straight as a die to our hotel in Rue de Gouët, right beside an elaborate timber-framed house with scaffolding propping it from toppling forward into the street.

Evening walkabout; rather bizarre cathedral with two big machicolated western towers under pyramidal roofs, mass about to start so left it for tomorrow. Elaine wanted a fondue, so found a fondue restaurant. Here they not only make you pay for your food but expect you to cook it as well; you are provided with a vat of boiling oil with a lamp beneath (providing scope for self-incineration if one gets vin-clumsy) and a bowl of chunks of raw meat, which one skewers and holds in the oil and then, when one thinks they are sufficiently done, dabbles in some multi-coloured sauces provided. Unenthralled. Elaine talked French to friendly folk who shared our table; je compris, but only un peu.

Unquiet sleep came slowly; distant city noises including far-away screaming, or was it police sirens? Thought of Lost Catherine.

Saturday 4th October

Our dernier jour of explorations. A sunny start, with the centre of St Bruic a-bustle with market stalls being set up. The Cathedral is a bit of an ugly beast as cathedrals go, but of course interesting; after those bizarre western towers comes an 18th-century nave and then medieval transepts and eastern arm, with the usual jumble of radiating chapels. Inside lots of old grave slabs in the floor; many have incised effigies. One apparent cross slab, worn, with an incised chalice, another fragment with part of a chalice and a third with a 1677 inscription and a chalice but no cross.

We had planned to round the holiday off with a tip to Mont St Michael, which we had previously visited in 1999, but the thought of having to walk across the causeway and then up the mountain lugging our gear was a bit off-putting, so went in search of the ruined **Chateau de la Hunaudaye**, down a maze of minor roads. Suit for the winter, but impressive nonetheless; it looks 14th/15th century, a polygon with a big machicolated round tower at each angle, surrounded by a recently re-dredged moat (there seems to have been an outer moat, now largely marshy depression, as well). Then Ms S led us on to Dinan via some very minor unmade roads (not too terrible, but care needed). We saw Dinan, or parts of it, in 1999 as well, but had not been to the chateau, where we were allowed to dump our gear and freed to roam the old town. The Chateau is very odd; just outside the town walls, you cross a bridge and enter half way up the huge donjon, or walk along over one of the medieval town gates to another huge tower which you enter at the top and go down; the chambers all had modern art installations, some intriguing, others just puzzling. The donjon is now entered by a relatively modern doorway punched in beneath the east window of the chapel, in which the lord heard mass sitting in his own tiny chamber with a carved chair and fireplace.

Dinon is a lovely old town, with lots of framing, but our hunt for medieval monastic buildings a bit fruitless; the house of the Jacobins is now a theatre, with only a bit of medieval work visible externally; the Cordeliers (Franciscans) was all shut up with keep-out notices; just a good gatehouse fronting the street, and a chink in the gate allowing the merest glance of a distant cloister (and a ferocious notice, clearly positioned for peepers-through-chinks, saying 'absolutely no access to this building'). In the Basilique-St-Sauveur found three worn cross slabs in the floor, with very familiar British-style designs;

they would not have been out of place in a County Durham parish church. Then the sky suddenly darkened and a heavy shower sent us scuttling back for our gear; retrieved it as the sun came out again. Wet granite cobbles and hilly winding streets a challenge on the bike, but eventually found our way down into the valley to **Léhon** and its priory. Did not get in the church as a wedding was in progress, but managed a quick trip into the 17th/18th century cloister and the fine medieval frater on its north side, just before the wedding party entered it en masse to sign the register there. It has an excellent reader's pulpit.

Set Satnav for **St Malo**, and she thankfully bypassed the heart of Dinan for us; mad bikers in the suburbs shot past us at two or three times the official 50kph limit; we trundle so slowly (and law-abidingly) that even little scooters overtake us with impunity, it may make them feel good and we don't mind. St Malo is big; several km of traffic lights and roundabouts before one crosses the causeway past the ferry terminals to the old town. Parked on the pavement in a ferry carpark (no one really seems to mind where you park bikes here), put gear in bags and hiked around the ramparts, which remain intact. The whole place has been put back together after being wrecked in 1944, but the walls and Chateau at the seaward tip seem to have survived quite well. The ramparts feel a bit like the walls of Berwick, very much designed for artillery defence although there are occasional earlier machicolated towers. The whole place heaving with visitors, photographing each other alongside the rusty cannon facing out to sea, or taking portraits of the sea gulls which are clearly completely used to human company. Much tourist merchandise based on pirates; St Malo was famous for its privateers in the 17th and 18th centuries. The ramparts provide fine views of forts on outlying rocky islands and of course a multiplicity of lighthouses. Within the walls are a tight grid of canyon-like straight streets between very uniform blocks of 18th-century style granite buildings; a lot of these are new, and of concrete faced with granite. In the middle of all this is the Cathedral, another one that is an architectural jumble, from the 12th century onwards. Photographs show it battered and spireless after the War; outside is a section of Romanesque cloister arcade, clearly re-erected, inside the usual gloom and candles; one glass box has a waxwork of an attractive young woman asleep, apparently constructed to contain a bone or two of some early Christian martyr, who of course must have been an attractive young woman...

Puffed and panted back to the bike, then a final twenty minutes south again, to our accommodation in the village of **St-Suliac**, going down the east side of the Estuary of the Rance and passing a picturesque old tidal mill. St-Suliac turned out to be a place to delight the heart of any student of vernacular architecture, lots of old stone houses with massive round-arched doors, many apparent 'bastles' with upper doorways as well, and a fine medieval church (although the 'parish close' looked just like a churchyard to us); quite a few dated lintels from the late 16th and 17th centuries (enquiry next morning showed that the upper doors, which are generally a little smaller than the lower ones, were in fact for hay, so these are not bastles at all, simply ordinary houses with big storage lofts). Also a fine crepiere, again in an ancient building; excellent evening feed although rather hot, seated alongside a huge fireplace in which the customer's meat was being grilled, although at least here they did not have to do it themselves. Madame was kept busy; this is obviously a place locals know about, and we were probably lucky to get a seat.

Sunday 5th October. Back across the Sea

Wet and grey; twenty minute ride, found ferry and straight aboard; this time the crew lashed down the bike for us. Eight-and-a-half hour journey, with quite a rough passage an hour or so out; didn't feel like lunch for a while, but things calmed down. The Isle of Wight hove into view still a couple of hours out from Portsmouth, displaying some nice geology.

Sunday 5th/Monday 6th October. England; straight up

Grey sky and drizzle as we entered Portsmouth; lots of interest as we approached the docks, then a rapid exit under a clearing sky, pink in the west, and straight onto the M27 north-west and lots of fast-moving traffic – until twenty minutes later it all stopped. Tried to sidle between lanes, but the bike is very hard to hold to a straight line at slow speeds, and the odd motorist was opening their doors to get out and stretch, so gave up on this. About half an hour later the accident or whatever was cleared and off we all went again. Then north up A34 to Newbury and Oxford, fast but rather horrible, at 75mph we were about the slowest on the road, bar the odd lorry or even tractor. Does this country have a speed limit? Where are the police? A high percentage of the cars are brand new; this must be fat-cat country. Every person driving a car under two years old should have it taken from them and replaced by a 13-year-old Skoda, bright yellow and rusty¹.

Fish-and-chips at a Little Chef near Oxford (not bad, actually) then on again, up the M40 for a while then Satnavved off at Banbury, thankfully onto quiet roads up to a few miles of Fosse Way (twistier than remembered, and a little fog); visor now steaming up, and then glasses if one raised it. A starry night now, and cold. Debouched onto a short length of A5 and then M69 to join the M1, stopped again at Leicester Forest East for a coffee and a red bull. The M1 itself quite a relief, mostly lit and virtually quiet; stayed with Elaine's sister just outside Chesterfield, arriving there 12.30 and very grateful for hot-water-bottles and an electric blanket.

Monday morning sunny but still a bit windy, on our way tennish, M1 and then A1; alternate finding an open patch between lorries in the inside lane and sitting there at 60 for a few miles, then blasting past a line of lorries at 75 before finding another quiet patch. Diverted to Thirsk for coffee with friends, then, sick of motorways and high-speed stuff, put Satnav on 'shortest' rather than 'fastest' and up through Northallerton and Darlington, even humouring her by following a very minor road through Houghton-le-Side before resuming the familiar A68; fed at Wear Valley Diner just after Toft Hill, and home for just after 4.00, grateful for Travelling Mercies. Cold house hopping with fleas (Verity the senile moggy had been allowed to sleep on the bed) but good to be back, after around 1400 miles. Bike beautifully behaved (although taking a bit more starting, needing choke – probably colder weather) but distinctly overloaded. Slow-speed stuff, especially tight bends, really quite worrying.

¹ This is a cheap reference to populist folklore; I have a 7-year old Skoda which is totally rust-free and probably the best-quality and most reliable car I have ever owned.