

FRANCE AUGUST 1999

Tuesday 3rd. Arrived Ouistreham as darkness fell, first experienced the excitement of driving on the wrong side of the road, but not for long as we found a place in a busy campsite only a mile or two from the ferry.

Wednesday 4th. Caen. Seven or eight miles inland to **Caen**, which, being so near the scene of the Normandy landings, was devastated in World War II. However, the battered enclosure of the huge Chateau at its centre survives, together with a fair number of old houses, and, places on opposite sides of the chateau and about a kilometre away, twin abbeys founded in the mid-11th century by William the Conqueror and his wife. The **Abbaye aux Dames**, to the east, has a fine Romanesque church with an austere west front rather reminiscent of Worksop. Inside, one of the more memorable features is a stoup with carved fish inside it; unfortunately the crypt can only be seen on guided visits, and these only take place in the afternoon. The monastic buildings, on the north, were remodelled in the 18th century, as often in France.

The **Chateau** has huge curtain walls, a little patched after the War, studded with towers, and with two elaborate gateways with complex barbicans. Inside the great donjon is reduced to its lower courses (fenced off and rather overgrown) but its immense splayed plinths and enclosing ditch - like the Louvre fortress in Paris - remain impressive. There is a scatter of other buildings, some museums, including a chapel and good Romanesque hall.

The **Abbaye aux Hommes** has a spectacular west front with two towers of immense height and a spreading apsidal eastern arm. The monastic buildings are here on the south; once again there has been extensive 18th century remodelling, but one clearly medieval block remains on the south side, which might have been the frater.

Bayeux is of course the home of the famous tapestry, housed in a building some distance east of the Cathedral; there is a surprisingly good display and video explaining the Tapestry on the upper floors, before the visitors are eventually funnelled down to the dimly-lit basement to see the real thing itself.

The Cathedral is impressive in the usual way of French cathedrals, with a spiky spire and roof-line and a Romanesque interior, with a crypt.

At **Cerisy-la-Foret** road signs pointed us to a village with a fine monastic church (although one shorn of most of its nave), again Romanesque, with a pyramid-roofed central tower. Attache to the former west end, and extending diagonally to the south-west, is a highly-picturesque 13th-century range including a gatehouse with an abbot's court-house and chapel on the upper floor.

A rainy evening and night; stayed overnight in a hotel at Vire.

Thursday 5th **Vire**, like Caen and many other small towns in the Invasion Zone, suffered heavily in the mid 1940s. The **Town Belfry** is a tall square tower raised on top of a 14th-century town gate with two heavily-machicolated round towers. An isolated mural tower with a similar parapet survives in a parallel street to the south. In the centre of the old walled town is a fine medieval parish church, and just beyond, on a rocky promontory overlooking the river, the site of the castle, now largely a great spread of tarmac. The enceinte seems to have largely gone, but at the end a higher craggy knoll amidst acres of tarmac car park carries a great crag of 12th-century donjon.

Saint Sever-Calvados. A small town with its abbey church still in use; it has a central tower; the nave has been truncated, leaving a smaller 17th-century west tower standing alone in the middle of the square outside. On the north are the monastic buildings, largely 18th century but with the north range clearly incorporating some medieval work. Then northwards through pleasant countryside and valley scenery, and the Roches de Ham, eventually to **Abbaye de Hambye**, a delightful ruin in verdant wooded countryside. The shell of the lofty and narrow church is intact, except for its west end; the apsidal presbytery has a ring of flying buttresses rising from the ambulatory wall. One is free to wander round the church ruin, but a visit to the monastic buildings on the south has to be guided. Most of the buildings are still roofed - the only major missing element is the south range. The chapter house is especially fine. Also interesting are a series of farm buildings, with old cider presses, to the south of the claustral complex.

Then on to find our campsite at St Pair sur Mer, three miles or so from the sea. After encamping, had to drive and found Abbaye de la Lucerne, but it was shut..

Friday 6th. Early departure for a drive down the coast, along winding roads, with occasional glimpses of our destination, **Mont St Michel**, miles away across the bay. This is one of those places, a single peak in a broad and all but level landscape, that draws the eye (and the pilgrim) much as Croagh Patrick in Western Ireland does. Close up it is stunning - but the vast acres of car park at its foot sound a warning, do not expect solitude!. Even though we arrived half an hour before opening, there were great queues stretching up the steps to the gateway. You enter through a town wall that hugs the base of the rock, then wind round its foot up a street overhung by old timbered houses, that steepens and becomes a stair, twisting back on itself to the gateway. Once inside, the winding ascent continues, through archways and between tall walls with a ribbon of sky overhead. At the top is the church, largely Romanesque, but shorn of the western bays of its nave (where there is now an open courtyard) in the 18th century. There is too much to begin to describe; the approved tourist route goes from the church into a delightful cloister, with one glazed arch in its outer wall giving a staggering view down onto the sands and sea five hundred feet below. Then down a series of stairs through a series of vaulted halls, one above the other, all very impressive. There are lots of other apartments at lower levels - including an earlier church- which are only seen on 'lecture tours'.

On into Brittany - Mont St Michel is on the Normandy/Brittany border - to the town of **Dinan**, which retains most of its medieval circuit of walls, not over-conserved and in parts mixed up with later buildings. There are a couple of old churches (one had a slab with a bracelet cross, which could well have come from County Durham), the remains of a friary with a gatehouse and one side of the cloister, and a 17th century 'belfry' where the timber upper stage groaned with the weight of tourists aloft, making it feel most unsafe. One section of the walls can be walked, with fine views down onto the half-timbered streets below.

Then back to **Dol-de-Bretagne** with a rather strange, supposedly semi-fortified cathedral. In the streets round are some old houses - one in fact distinctly 12th-century with a chevron-moulded arcade of round arches. Finally **Avranches**, a bit disappointing - some remnants of its castle in a public garden, with a good view from the top, but all rather mute and patched.

Saturday 7th First a return to **Abbaye de la Lucerne**, which was very attractive. A Premonstratensian house, since the revolution its church had lain in ruins - one nave arcade had gone - but in the last twenty years or so it has been restored. All is roofed, but the nave is still being worked on inside. It is very difficult to see the joins between old and new! In the

cloister, the chapter house is a picturesque ruin, the west range roofed (and part museum) and the south range, the refectory, just restored - two third new, but very convincing. To the east a long aqueduct, put up when the buildings were used as a paper mill last century. To the south, reflected in the waters of a little lake, the very picturesque abbot's house (private, 18th century in appearance. On to **Mortain**, with a gorge and waterfall - more a cascade. On the hill on one side a good Romanesque church, on the other, beside the main road, an Abbey (still in use) with a Romanesque church and a range of contemporary buildings continuing the line of the nave to the west. The east range, altered, survived, but the south side of the cloisters had gone. On through countryside rich in small timber-framed houses and barns to La Fosse Arthoure, which according to the guidebook had streams falling into deep limestone caverns. There was a stream, but, as far as we could see, no limestone (some quite good quartzite crags) and no caverns. Not far to the north-east was the little town of **Lonlay l'Abbaye**, with an abbey - an early Romanesque church shorn of its nave, with early transepts and the usual polygonal east end, rather plainer this time; the east range of the monastic buildings, with the usual chapter house doorway, survives. Then to **Domfront**, atop its sandstone ridge. At the west end, protected by crags on three sides and a deep rock-cut ditch on the fourth, the castle, with a shattered Romanesque keep and the newly-excavated footings of a monastic (?) church within the walls. The town itself has lots of old houses, some stone, some timbered, and quite a striking early-20th-century church festooned in green netting (because bits keep falling off) . About a mile away, down by the river, a splendid early 11th-century church, **Nôtre-Dame-sur-l'Eau**, with apses of chancel and transepts, but a nave shorn of its western bays and aisles by road widening early last century.

Sunday 8th Travel north-east, through Vire again, than to **Falaise**, with the cliff that gives the town its name crowned by a massive **Chateau**; a lengthy curtain wall with towers, and excavations/conservation in progress within. The donjon is the most striking feature, a great square block, a little like castle Rising or Colchester, with a later round tower attached to one corner. It was a ragged shell, but reconstruction has been bold; the forebuilding has reappeared, but in metal, and in the main building glass floors have been inserted; there has also been a fair amount of reconstruction of missing walling etc. An archetypical English guide is available and makes a good job of it.

Heading north-east again, through an almost surreal open landscape in which straight roads lined with Lombardy poplars, a signpost pointed to **Perrieres** and a priory. Driving down what was probably only intended as a footpath took us through a medieval archway to the end of a great stone 13th-century barn, but it was locked up; a footpath wound round to a Romanesque church, in which were photographs of the barn; it was not quite clear whether this was a priory in the sense we know, or a grange. Then on to **St-Pierre-sur-Dives**, a little town where the main street was closed for a street fair. We parked in a dead-end side street, in a yard overlooked by a marvellous 15th-century stone house with some really ornate features, ramshackle and derelict., the sort of thing one might find in an 18th-century Buckler print of Lincoln. Near the town centre is the fine abbey church, with a fascinating sundial in the nave that entails a long incised line crossing the floor, all very strange. Parts of the cloister buildings survive, including a good chapter house.

On to a cheap but comfortable hotel in **Bernay**, a town with narrow street overhung by many timber-framed houses.

Monday 9th. Bernay was more thoroughly explored before breakfast the next morning, when we found the remains of a Franciscan friary with what seemed to be a timber-framed cloister, and one fragment of a stone church. On to **Conches en Ouche**, with a fine medieval church

full of old glass, and the donjon of a **chateau** that had a central circular tower enclosed by a shell wall with a variety of rounded projections; the main entrance as grilled, with 'keep out' notices, but round a corner entry was easy, so a quick and surreptitious examination followed.

Back to Bernay again, where the **Abbey** church was now open. Externally it is a bit of a hotch potch, with a totally reconstructed eastern apse (in wood, shingle-hung), but internally it is much more impressive and has some splendid mid-11th century detail, although the cherub's heads on the nave capitals are surely a case of the lily being provided with an 18th-century gilding. As often, the monastic buildings were remodelled very grandly in the 18th century, although the abbots house, largely of brick, is two hundred years earlier. Then on to the major **Benedictine Abbey of Le Bec-Hellouin**, three of whose abbots moved over the water to take up the archiepiscopate of Canterbury including Lanfranc and St Anselm. The visitor does not have access to a great deal; there is the massive 15th-century St Nicholas' Tower, detached from the church but in line with the north transept, but the church itself is largely footings except for a bit of the south transept; it had the usual eastern apse and chevet. The monastic buildings are all post-1600, in use and out of bounds to normal visitors.

North again to wind down a minor road below impressive chalk cliffs to cross the Seine by ferry, to Jumieges and our camp site. **Jumieges** has an extraordinary old church with a Romanesque nave, a timber-framed central tower, and a huge sprawling apsidal eastern arm with far-flung radiating chapels, but far more important is the **Abbey**. The towering Romanesque nave has a Carolingian-style westwork with two soaring towers, and the west side of a massive crossing tower; the eastern arm, apsidal as usual, is more ruinous. There are also ruins of east and west ranges, the former incorporating, south of the chapter house, an earlier church dedicated to St Peter, parts of which are 8th century. There are apparently extensive underground vaults on the site of the south range, but these are out of bounds to the public. An 18th-century abbots house stands some distance to the east.

Then, as the afternoon darkened and torrential rain came and went, to another Benedictine monastery a few miles north, **St Wandrille**. Here, as at Le Bec-Hellouin, the monks were again resident. The church was ruinous, although the north transept was an impressive shell; we did not see the cloister buildings, 18th century from a distance but retaining important medieval sections including the cloister itself and an important 12th-century refectory. To the east a re-erected medieval barn forms the present church, where we attended vespers; later we managed to introduce ourselves to the abbey archivist; some language problems but no lack of friendliness, and talked about Ecclesfield, St Wandrille's cell in South Yorkshire.

Tuesday 10th Dawned wet and bleak, the tent half awash. Drove to **Rouen** in difficult conditions, and managed a brief look at the city centre, the very impressive **Cathedral**, and the equally huge but strangely unimpressive **St Etienne**, with tremendous architecture and good glass, but a great empty bleak barn nonetheless. Some tremendous timber-framed street survived the War (or have been very cunningly reconstructed afterwards). Then, in easing conditions, eastwards, to the **Abbaye de Fontaine Geruard**, a former Cistercian nunnery oddly owned by the Salvation Army. Situated in a pleasant chalk valley, beside the big spring that gives it its name, the remains are very reminiscent of Valle Crucis in North Wales, the shell of a 13th-century church and a roofed east range, with a chapter house below and an impressive dormitory above, which has retained its original roof, with trait-de-Jupiter scarfs in the tie beams!. Then to **Abbaye de Moretemer**, in pleasant country but rather more commercialised. The ruins of the church are half-consolidated and a bit tatty, the main upstanding chunks being the transepts; there are substantial pieces of the cloisters, with the south range remodelled in the 18th century, then to the south is a fine dovecote still with its

internal timberwork.

On through Les Andelys following signs to **Chateau Gaillard**, up winding roads climbing high above the Seine valley; the Chateau finally comes in view below, strung out along a narrow carriage ridge poised high above the river. This is really an English castle, built by Richard I. Only the outer bailey is accessible, enclosed by intermittent great crags of curtain wall and tower; within it a rock-cut ditch encloses the inner ward, sadly closed; behind its intact curtain can be glimpsed the central circular keep. There is scope for archaeospeleology here in a series of chalk tunnels opening off the inner ditch, and into the sheer face of the cliff below the towering curtain of the inner ward.

Wednesday 11th Eclipse day. Broke camp at Jumieges and drove north towards the centre of the belt of totality, calling at **Duclair** which has a fascinating parish church with an intriguing mix of a thousand years of architecture - and absolutely no interpretative material. After that it was finding a quiet spot by a rural road and settling down to watch the heavens And afterwards, suitably impressed, turned west down to **Abbaye du Valasee** which was a total disappointment. A large house of 18th-century appearance, thoroughly locked and shuttered, may enclose some medieval parts, but all we saw were a few worked stones littered around outside

Along with hordes of other homeward-bound eclipse-viewers struggled our way across the fairly stunning Pont du Normandie high across the Seine, then west towards Caen. Quit the congested motorway, and found ourselves in **Pont l'Eveque** where the town map showed a **Dominican Friary** - or at least, three different versions of the town plan showed Dominican Friaries in three different places. Some picturesque framed houses seemed to fit the bill, so photographed and sketched them., before moving on to find further framed buildings, apparently forming two sides of a cloister, which were labelled as the genuine article.

West again, in fading light, to **Troarn**, where noticed another **Abbaye** sign. All that survived here was a single block of the west range, roofed (and locked) but with a superb range of 13th-century windows at first floor. An information board reproduced an 18th-century (?) plan showing the whole monastic layout, although everything else seemed to have quite thoroughly disappeared. And finally, in the dusk, to **Ouistreham**, and a quick glimpse of a good Romanesque church (and a medieval range perhaps a barn, alongside) which surprisingly seemed to have survived the D-Day landings here. A last sitting-outside meal (poisson-et-frites but the poisson still had its yeux in, which was disconcerting) and a comfortable hotel, for a dawn rise and a last few hundred metres on French soil to the ferry.