

France 2004. Log des vacances

Wednesday 8th September

The last moments of the flight into Carcassonne are somewhat worrying; the plane seems to stutter and slow as it descends, and the absorbing aerial view of hilltop villages tightly clustered around their churches is tempered by the realisation that the wings are just about brushing the vine rows in the vineyards between them: at the last moment the airfield appears, the wheels hit tarmac and the brake are applied, hard... then one man in a fluorescent waistcoat with table tennis bats in each hand guides the plane in to its parking space in front of the airport building; he is joined by a second who helps roll up the mobile steps so we can disembark. All in all, a far cry from Stansted, or Newcastle for that matter. Then we are on terra firma again, noticing that it is both warm and windy, the sky is clear and blue and we are in France.

A few minutes in a queue to collect the hire car, then we are out of town and heading east, stopping to look at one of the villages we saw from the air; the church has a characteristic rectangular-plan bell tower with two tiers of lancet openings, a pair in the long sides and single ones in the ends. Then on to St Papoul and its abbey. The Benedictine monastery lies just outside the little walled town. It has a delightful Romanesque cloister and a contemporary church, rather Baroque inside but more or less unaltered outside. The west end has a fine doorway with a chi-rho monogram over, the east an apse with marvellous capitals by the Master of Cabestany (celebrated in an exhibition inside). An east-west block south of the chapter house claims to be the refectory, as its conventional position outside the south cloister walk is taken by the bishop's palace. Back outside, the little town has some highly picturesque timber-framed houses with jettied fronts and seemingly random patterns of studs and braces, sometimes infilled with old brick.

Then along twisty upland roads via Saissac to our booked chamber d'hote at the Abbey of Ville Longue, which we first visited last autumn. Both the setting and the accommodation would be almost impossible to improve on; an antiquarian traveller could hardly be happier. A dawn ramble around the ruins (accompanied by a little phalanx of friendly cats) and then le petit déjeuner at a table set in the surviving south walk of the cloister; it does not get any better than this, except that maybe in heaven I'll understand the language.

Thursday 9th September: Saissac

A village clinging to hillsides around a ravine, on one side of which a ridge leads out past the parish church (13th century with the usual Baroque interior) to end in a big ruined castle; access is via a new and rather fine museum crouching beneath the west end of the church. A good site, although the pidgin English guide sheet was a bit embarrassing and put the keep in the wrong place. The real keep was five-sided, and got dynamited by 19th-century treasure hunters so that only the pointed end remains. One big block was converted in to a mansion in the 17th century, and is currently scaffolded, having its Renaissance architectural detailing re-instated. Despite this, and the whole place being full of building materials and men with wheelbarrows, most of it remains accessible to the public in a way that would never happen in England. A barrow load of rubble from on high clattered down just behind us at one point; one trusts that the tipper had waited for us to pass. The ruined buildings are on a series of different levels, with lots of cellars and vaults scooped into the underlying rock. A big and elongate site on the scale of somewhere like Chepstow, but virtually all the original dressed stonework seems to have been robbed.

Then down to the valley, and a spot of faster roads until threading a route through and past Carcassonne gave us a taste of French urban driving and traffic queues; the sun disappeared and under slightly ominous skies we were soon away into less populous hill country again, to the south-east this time, on the way to:

Lagrasse. An exceedingly medieval walled town, all narrow streets and ancient houses, looks across a little river (spanned by a couple of bridges, one medieval and one 18th/19th century) to a great Benedictine abbey of St Marie d'Orbieu.. Frustratingly only part of it is open; the remainder is occupied again by a religious community, and apparently this was the one day of the week they did not receive visitors. An additional problem was the English guidebook; English-language versions of French guides often make one smile, but this was near-incomprehensible, with separate plans of the 'public' and 'private' parts of the abbey which it was impossible to relate to each other; this is one site where it is difficult to see any relationship at all between the buildings and the conventional monastic plan which is the lingua franca of both England and France. The bulk of the medieval buildings were open, and they were well worth the visit. The high light is the east range with vaulted undercrofts and a huge dorter spanned by transverse arches, stone trusses carrying the (renewed) roof; there is a little courtyard cum cloister on the east of it, with on its north, at first-floor level, the abbot's chapel with remains of wall paintings and a superb tiled floor. Just off the north end of the dorter is a 'Pre-Romanesque' tower, quite small and simple. Further north, beyond the inaccessible church (a medieval south transept seems to survive) is a huge 16th-century tower, now shorn of its upper parts. The main cloister and ranges of buildings to the east of it were built during the monastic revival of the late 18th century.

St Martin les Puits

A charming little semi-derelict Romanesque church crouching below the road; it is actually cruciform (although the north transept is no more than a shallow recess) although the crossing is odd, with a wide segmental western arch and a strange horseshoe-shaped eastern one with re-used Merovingian capitals. The east end is for once square, and has extensive remains of 12th-century paintings. The nave, with a bell cote on its western gable is very short, with a font built into the north-west corner. The bells hang mutely from a beam, with no sign of any way in which they could ever be rung; a donations box anthropomorphises the building into pleasing for 'my restoration'

Termes

A shattered castle with a history, besieged by the notorious Simon de Montfort, scourge of the Cathars. Like so many hereabouts it crowns a craggy hill, not as abrupt as Peyrepeteuse and Montsegor, but still requiring a stiff walk to get up. There is a good guidebook and plenty of explanatory panels, but what remains is more archaeology than architecture, quite a lot of high slabs of walling but in general badly ruined. The keep at the highest point has all but gone; nearby is a so-called chapel; it has one cruciform window in a side wall that looks to be something other than a normal arrow loop, but it is aligned north-south and has no other evidence of ecclesiastical use. Interesting butterflies (white admirals?), lizards, and scuttling noises in the undergrowth.

Cubieres

We were booked into a chambre d'hôte/gîte in this little village of seventy or eighty souls. Despite its external appearance, typical of small village houses in this area in mingling shades of ancient dereliction and current building site, it turned out to be clean and comfortable within. Madame was the mayor of the little community, Monsieur did the cooking. Friendliness, hospitality and culinary fare were all of the highest order; the only things on the down side were the heat and nocturnal outbreaks of communal barking and howling by the local canines, which combined to reduce sleep to a few fitful sweaty snatches.

Friday 10th September

And to add to all the positives, a few metres away was the village church, a quite extraordinary structure. At first glance it looked like to have the usual plan, with a bellcote capping one end and a shallow apse at the other, but closer inspection (and the fact that its orientation was north-south, not east-west) showed that there was nothing usual about it. In fact this was an early (8th/9th century?) abbey church that seems to have returned to a simple parochial function by the 12th/13th, and maybe been restored from state of ruin at some time. The broad south front is early, with little round-headed windows set high up, and a second apse at the south end of the east side; the other walls run on most peculiar alignments, and may well be post-medieval, joining up surviving piers from an original three-aisled structure. Inside, the round arches linking the piers survive. It appears that a north aisle has been lost completely, and that the building continued some distance to the west – we were told that a continuation of the south wall had been seen in a recently-dug grave – in fact a break-in-alignment on the west wall of the churchyard hints that it might have gone this far, although the land drops quite steeply in this direction. On the east side of the exterior one can see the springing of the south side of the main apse, which would appear to have been horseshoe-shaped rather than the usual simple chord. We were shown various reconstructed plans, none of which quite squared with the visible evidence...

Peyrepeteuse

Most of the castles hereabouts sit on isolated hills or ridges, but for the sheer verticality of its environs, Peyrepeteuse surely cannot be beaten. Its three wards ascend along the summit of a prodigious wall of rock; its south sides a vertical or even overhanging expanse of limestone hundreds of metres high, and its west end again overhanging like the beetling prow of a great boat. The north side is vertical in parts and in other merely extremely steep; it is here that the approach path meanders upwards through the scrub and trees. The lower ward is currently swathed in scaffolding, and, unlike at Saissac, the public are excluded. Curtain and defences all of necessity face north and are quite well preserved; south is just an immensity of empty air. To the west is the Lower Donjon that includes a vaulted apsidal chapel (clearly heightened at some later date). Then the middle section of the rock is girdled on the north by a curtain at a lower level, but contains little other than a ruinous polygonal structure enclosing a natural limestone pothole, now grilled over. The western end of the ridge soars skywards to the Donjon of St Jordi (St George) approached by a long flight of rock-cut steps; its and round-ended towers face north and east. The more ruinous eastern towers, one again containing an apsidal chapel, provide a belvedere for the classic view down along the ridge. The top of the rock rises beyond this final section of defences, but is roped off and out of bounds to visitors; it is in some ways frustrating and in other ways a relief not to feel obliged to climb to the ultimate rocky eyrie that seems now to be quite unadorned by any human construction.

Peyrepeteuse has seen a lot of archaeological work; bookshops have a big soft-back volume, with excavation reports and detailed structural studies, for 30 euros or so, but the only English text available seems to be a folding sheet which as often gives much less than one would have wanted.

Queribus

Another parallel ridge a few miles south-east of Peyrepeteuse is topped by a single great polygonal tower, with lesser buildings stepping up to it from the west. This is the castle of Queribus, another tourist magnet. As at Peyrepeteuse, a steep twisty road allows cars (and coaches) to get within a few hundred metres, and the final approach is a straightforward steadily rising path beneath the castle walls on its north side – but the mid-afternoon sun is very hot, even at this time of year. Queribus is relatively intact; the great donjon tower has clearly been restored and seems quite intact. The visitor approaches it through a gatehouse (oddly studded with stone balls looking as if they are embedded in the masonry – cannon-ball rustication perhaps?) and then up a series of stone stairs through ascending yards and roofless structures, with the usual cisterns necessary for any garrison living in the sky like this. Finally comes a roofless three-storeyed range of 16th or 17th century date, and the donjon itself. At the base of the newel stair a passage leads down – lit, just, by occasional slits, to a chamber deep in the tower's substructure with arrow loops commanding the approach. Further up, the chief feature of the tower is a great hall vaulted from a central pier, and lit by single huge transomed window. The summit of the tower, clearly heavily restored if not reconstructed, allows expansive views.

Padern

This is not one of the castles mentioned in the tourist guide, and is not as yet conserved and manicured to accommodate the tourist. However, it towers from a rock overhanging the little town, and the word 'CHATEAU' is helpfully painted on a wall directing one upwards, first along tiny roads only centimetres wider than the car, and then up steep steps (past a little medieval chapel) to a winding ascent that surprisingly delivers one in a few minutes to the summit of the crag. A public footpath passes close to the ruin, which is not fenced off but has a single notice warning 'access interdit; pierres tombe'. At the north end is a tower with big windows (17th century?) rising straight from the cliff face, with to the south a range of buildings similarly roofless and shattered, with few extant architectural features; to south and south-east they are enclosed by a curving length of tall curtain, again fairly featureless, all rather cluttered with fallen debris. Nevertheless, from the rising ground to the south the ruins and limestone mountain rising across the valley beyond make a picturesque ensemble.

Aigular

A couple of miles north of the small town of Tuchan, this is the fifth of the 'five sons of Carcassonne' (the other four are Peyrepeteuse, Puylaurens, Queribus and Termes, all of which we have now visited); the ruin is visible afar off, crowning a rocky hill rather than a soaring crag, and the approach road delivers one, thankfully, to within a couple of hundred metres of the ruin. Apart from some obvious pragmatic patching of overhanging masonry, the ruin is as yet 'unimproved'; the owners clearly want to give visitors value for their euros (2.30 admission, a bit cheaper than the better-known sites anyway) so there are hand-painted notices everywhere introducing one both to the castle and examples of the local flora; the fauna too is catered for by a board of deceased and labelled insects displayed on the custodian's stall. The castle itself is made up of elements familiar to the English visitor. The rock is crowned by a multi-sided enclosure of 12th-century date, retaining little architectural detail other than some good round-headed rear arches to its slits. There are remains of a two-storeyed building at one end of the enclosure, and one end of a barrel-vaulted cellar at the other; doubtless much awaits excavation. Attached to the north wall is a square tower, perhaps an addition, containing the usual cisterns. This inner enclosure is quite tightly girdled by a curtain wall of around 1300 studded with round-ended towers (all open 'at the gorge', ie internally); the principal gate (now quite ruinous) on the west is defended by a small barbican, and there is also a postern to the north-east. Perching on a rock a little outside the main gate is the Romanesque Chapel of St Anne, with the usual apse and scatter of slit windows. There also has been a big outer enclosure extending down the hillside on the south, its enclosing walls mostly just a tumble of debris.

Forty minutes back to Cubieres; do they really need to have so many bends in the roads here? Despite the distractions of the wonderful scenery, and silhouettes of jagged ridges against the western sky, by the end of the day a car passenger is feeling quite sick.

Saturday September 11th. North and north-west

Departure from Cubieres came rather later than expected; a last look at that fascinating church and then I mentioned to Madame (Francois) that an old house to the east looked interesting, so she took me there and the owner, who is slowly restoring it, was only too happy to show us round. Locally known as 'le chateau de

Cubieres' it is a form of building they would actually term 'un maison forte' – a strong house, and not far removed from the North of England type of that name. Late 17th or early 18th century, a thick-walled east-west block with a short wing projecting south at each end, two and a half storeys high. The ground floor has a big central doorway in a moulded surround, but its original windows are small, chamfered round and grilled with iron bars. The first floor had rooms with good plasterwork and bigger windows; the 'French floors' have joists carrying two superimposed level of boards (at right angle to each other) and then lime/concrete and finally tiles. The ground floor kitchen had a fireplace with a bread oven, and also a 'potager', a shelf with two square openings in which bowls would rest, heated by small braziers beneath, in making soup.

Finally, before leaving Cubieres, we visited a little museum of minerals and fossils, small but a sheer delight, not only in the range and quality of the specimens, but in the associated collections of wine bottles with minerals mentioned in their names, posters for mineral exhibitions, and photographs of the owner's visit to mineralogical places (like Mount Etna); the display exemplified a love and a passion, not simply science. The minerals in particular were splendid, as good as any museum, the fossils not quite as good – the French ammonites tended to be a bit small and squashed, he had obviously never been to Whitby and could have done with a good *Dactyloceras communis*.

So it was around eleven by the time we were on our way west, past Bugarach and its spectacularly jagged Peak (around 1200m) soaring into the clouds on the south, then north through gorges to Arques with its Chateau. This has been a square ward with towers at the corners and a fine late 13th century donjon standing alone in the middle; now re-roofed and with its upper timber floors replaced, this is a splendid structure with much good architectural detail including the ribbed vaults to its two lower floors. The village a few hundred metres to the east is interesting as well; the square tower of the parish church is thought to be part of an earlier chateau, and there was the usual museum of Catharism, which did however tell the truth and separate the myth from the fact, which is that, as regards archaeology and artefacts, we have absolutely nothing that is probably Cathar. We ate in a café in the village, sitting in a little yard surrounded by decaying mopeds and motorbikes from the 1940s and 1950s, with a few strategic pots of plants and flowers; what would have looked like a scrapyard in England was here total charm and interest. The French can do things we can't. Left, regretfully without the Peugeot 125 that looked so like a D1 Bantam, crying out for loving restoration. And those Solex mopeds with little engines on the front wheel.... This too is archaeology. I want one.

Already afternoon, and with some serious miles to cover. Frustration at Alets-les-Bains; this time the ruined abbey was not closed for repairs, but 'owing to exceptional circumstances' was not re-opening until 1500 hours. We just did not have the time for a three-quarter-hour hang-around. So round the Carcassonne ring road again, and north over the Monagne Noir, threading our way through a couple of sizeable towns (Mazamet and Castre) before arriving at Albi around 1730.

The old centre of Albi is a bit surreal, because the vast cathedral and Bishop's Palace/Chateau alongside, both 13th century, are built of brick. This itself is strange, but the problem is that the brick does not look old, like old brick in England does. Is it the climate? The Albi brick looks, well, of the vintage of a century or so but no older, its surfaces are smooth and it is pinkish brown, not orange. Has there been massive re-facing?

Albi was once famous for its Cathars, hence their official name 'Albigensians', but the present cathedral was built more than half a century after they were stamped out, perhaps, as it is claimed, as a demonstration of the true faith. It is a great slab of a building, a simple east-west block with a multi-lobed apse at the east end and a soaring tower at the other, a typical French parish church writ enormous. The buttresses between the bays and at the angles of the tower are all round in plan; the elevations have a lower tier of simple lancets and an upper of tall two-lights windows. Inside there are no aisles but each bay has an arched recess, containing a chapel, with the larger window above it. Inside everything is painted, without a single naked brick in sight. The most striking painting is the doom across the west end, although the Christ judging the departed souls has gone, when a new organ loft was created in the 18th century and an additional high-level arch broken through into the tower. At mid-height the Saved queue up for heaven, clutching books, lower down and far more memorably the Damned are tortured in appropriate manners for whichever of the seven deadly sins earned them their ticket to perdition.

The previous Romanesque cathedral (of stone) lay to the north of the present one; its site seems to have been built over, but a few bays of its cloister arcade have been re-erected by the road a little to the south-west, a bit like that fragment of the Archbishop's cloister beside York Minster. We found a better (but still incomplete) Romanesque cloister down the street to the south-east of the Cathedral, attached to the collegiate church of St Salvi, which itself is a likeable mix of Romanesque stone and Gothic brick (again, the brick is not apparent inside); Saturday evening mass was just starting so we ended up sitting in on it on the back pew. The priest (or maybe some visiting ecclesiastical dignitary) delivered a good straight-down-the-line sermon that was neither Catholic nor Protestant but simply Christian; once again challenging the hidebound prejudices still lurking after an evangelical nonconformist upbringing.

By now it was too late to go questing for food before our 21.00 deadline for checking in to our edge-of-town cheap hotel/motel, so under hot and heavy skies darkening with cloud we headed for the outskirts. The

impressive and overdue thunderstorm came as we ate in a modern brasserie in the same retail park as the motel; despite the distinctly untraditional surroundings the food was still excellent and prices reasonable. The storm flashed and rumbled itself away to wherever storms go, but disappointingly still left the night humid and sweaty, and sleep intermittent and fitful. If only this whole place was five (or even ten) degrees cooler...

Sunday 12th September

A marginally cooler morning, but the sun, coming and going, soon removed the last damp patches from the outrage of the previous evening. Back into the centre of Albi, and to Le Palais de la Berbie, the massive palace-cum-fortress of the Bishops of Albi who, it appears, were not pleasant people, and lived in fear of both the local townsfolk and the national authorities, hence immense walls and towers – like the cathedral, all of brick – were a good idea. The only parts of the interior open to the public today are now a museum to the work of Toulouse Lautrec who famously recorded (and patronised) Paris bars and brothels around the turn of the 19th/20th century; there is an incongruity here to give some food for thought on the human condition and all that. Enlarged versions of his posters and paintings are hung round the external walls to screen current conservation work, again slightly odd but c'est plus interestee.

However, we forwent the pleasures of the museum and confined ourselves to the Palace gardens (free) with splendid views of the river and 11th century Old Bridge, and then walked across the said bridge for equally splendid views looking back the other way. Marshals with flags were on every street corner – it was a triathlon this morning, and soon we were flattening ourselves against walls as bronzed triathletes (of both sexes) streaming with sweat clattered and puffed their way around the rabbit warren of medieval streets in the old city. There is old brick and timber framing everywhere, and a few more distinguished buildings with belvedere-like towerlets rising above the general skyline; many buildings have open arcaded galleries at attic level. There are occasional hints of a still-older town, in stone, such as one Indian Restaurant with its lower two storeys a Romanesque building still retaining an impressive first-floor portal (now blocked). Searched for a Carmelite Friary, but this turned out to be an 18th or 19th-century neo-Gothic building, its cloister preserved in the present Palais de Justice.

Returned to the car and wove our way around more panting tri-athletes, and left Albi with its sunlit brick looking superb against a dark cloudy sky. It was time to cover some serious kilometres, so Cordes-sur-Ciel was passed by and, winding through rolling wooded countryside and shallow gorges, we eventually arrived at Beaulieu Abbey, now an arts centre. It was lunchtime, so we retreated a few villages back down the road in a fruitless quest for a snack bar; we did however find the village of Alroc which has an amazingly picturesque church, 12th century or earlier, with tower over both east and west ends, with under a shed on the north a couple of ancient coffins, one with a lid bearing a relief-carved cross that in England would have been pre-1100; how old are things like this here? Sadly the church was locked, but sketched its exterior. Then to Beaulieu; a lovely plain Cistercian church, just going Gothic, and absolutely intact; a low octagonal belfry over the crossing, with foiled circular windows in each face, was its most striking feature externally. The cloister itself had gone, but its surrounding ranges remained. Those on the south and east had been remodelled and heightened, although a simple chapter house remained intact in the former. The lay brother's range on the west was more complete, but only extended two thirds of the way to the south-west corner of the cloister garth, leaving an open gap. Whether truncated or not, it retained a two-aisled vaulted basement, and on the floor above (long used as a barn, hence its vernacular post-medieval roof structure) what is now an exhibition hall. The current exhibition here was of big photographs of natural surfaces and textures – bark, water, stone – which were quite impressive; that in the church was of mid-19th century photographs of French ancient monuments, taken by the country's first inspector of the same, and some of these were very fine; a huge and very sharp print of a church in Rouen, perspective-corrected and all, dated '1858' remains in the mind.

The afternoon was slipping by, but the map showed another abbey 'Abbey Loc.Dei' a few minutes drive to the north. This proved to be another Cistercian house with an interesting feature; a church (intact and very like Beaulieu, except that it had aisles) of the late 12th and early 13th centuries, and cloister buildings recast as a fortress in the 14th/15th century after the place was wrecked by English visitors. After the Revolution it became a farm, then finally it was recast as a Gothic mansion in the 1880s. The external elevations of the buildings are largely of this last period, although a projecting round tower at the west end of the south front is older. Inside one is shown a fine 14th/15th century cloister (the north walk gone) and chapter house; the upper floors are still a family residence. The church is also shown; here I got excited, in pidgin French, at the sight of two cross slabs (one with a bell as its emblem, the other the top end of an abbot's slab with a hand-in-blessing at the centre of the crosshead and the top of a crozier. I am not sure whether the guide, who spoke no English at all, really understood.

Then west towards Cahors, with a brief stop in a village having a brocante, a sort of car-boot sale without the cars, with trestle tables groaning with glorious junk taking up the whole street. There was a café, but it was so inundated with brocante-goers that it was obvious service would take at least half an hour, and the sun was

hurrying t'ward its westward bower so we upper and offed again.

Finally we had to resort to the motorway we had threatened ourselves with; France is a big place and these things are the only real option for getting anywhere in a hurry, but of course you cannot stop and get out to look at the interesting things you career past. However, a hundred kilometres sped by in barely an hour, and we were soon at Limoges and questing for overnight accommodation. The first looked agreeably cheap but on closer inspection actually turned out to be derelict, the second advertised 'bed and breakfast' in English, so we decided it would be too dear (on the premise the French consider the English well-heeled). We eventually headed for the airport, and found a sort of airmotel, a bit bland and not that cheap, but clean and OK; evening meal in Limoges, but too tired to do anything except find and eat food.

Monday 13th September

North-west towards Confolens, and stumbled, quite inadvertently, on Lesterps. Places like Lesterps are the wonderful; thing about France – a stunning abbey church with a 9th-century westwerk surmounted by a late 11th century tower, with the nave in use but the fragmentary 12th-century eastern parts and cloister buildings all picturesquely mixed up with houses. Then to Abbey de la Ruye – just a name on the map – that turned out to be sheer delight as well, an Augustinian house which, a bit like yesterday's Abbe de Loc Dei had a multi-phase story – 12^{th/13th} century monastery, 14th-century fortification, 18th century reconstruction (monastic buildings) and then country house phase. The aisleless cruciform church was a roofless ruin, and largely still in its original state, although the fortification phase had added massive diagonal buttresses to its east end with bartizans on top. It also added a round tower, with a steep conical cap, to the south-east corner of the east range (the monastic buildings lie north of the church); inside the east range is a fine Romanesque chapter house, but most of the rest has been remodelled; the north range survives as well, but this is almost all post-medieval. Various other ruined and semi-ruined buildings are dotted around, a big barn the west, another round tower to the north-west, a dovecote (this countryside is full of them) and a 'chai' which we think is to do with wine production.

A rare moment of frustration followed- the abbey at Charroux was closed on Mondays, so we could only view it from outside the fence. Mind you, that was close enough to get a good look at the huge rotunda, with crypts, that formed the crossing of the huge church. Very reminiscent of St Augustine's Abbey at Canterbury, except that here an octagonal 11th century tower in the centre still stood to full height. The east range and cloister garth also survive but could only be glimpsed from a distance. To the west was a good gatehouse, still on the street, and in the market place to the north a fine 16th century market hall with some interesting timber frame details, and west of that a superb four-storeyed 14^{th/15th} century house, currently on sale at E160,000.

West again to Melle, a town blessed with no less than three Romanesque churches, all cruciform with central towers and apsidal east ends. St Hilarien, down by the river, was the finest, with a staggering display of carved detail (some 'restoration') and an eastern ambulatory with an array of five little apses. St Pierre, away to the north-east, was little smaller, and less restored, whilst St Savinien, in the town centre on the end of a spur, has long been secularised but nevertheless is quite intact except for its nave vault having been replaced in wood. Slightly simpler, this is the earliest of the three. Melle was a service station on the pilgrim motorway to Compostella, and St Hilaire and St Pierre are said to have been monastic and served as pilgrim motels, although neither has any direct evidence of attached buildings.

Melle also has a Carolingian Silver Mine, which makes it a bit special; the silver was taken from galena, and coins (deniers) struck here have been found all over Europe. There is a visitor centre, and for E6 one is lectured at some length then taken down the mines themselves, then lectured again, slightly surprisingly, on early medieval herbiculture. Our guide was very personable and enthusiastic, but being subject to an hour or more of unintelligible machine-gun French is a little wearing. It is impressive that paying visitors here are happy to be educated rather than just entertained.

By now the sky was darkening, and Elaine showing signs of Romanesque-church-fatigue, so we circumnavigated Niort to find a supermarket, and then drove through quite heavy rain to Moulieron-en-Pareds, which is to be our base for the next week or so. The weather faired to greet us; Martin and Ginni's house which I have promised to investigate looks set to give hours of fun, as a substantial part of it in fact looks to be thoroughly medieval.

Tuesday 14th September

A day of measuring, drawings, cobwebs, large and irritant insect bites and the discovery of the biggest-ever spider I have seen in a bath – like English bath spiders but at least twice the size (10cm diameter – measuring rod was to hand). French plugholes are no larger than English ones; how on earth could it fit through? Had a walk round the village in the afternoon – very typically French and interesting in being that, rather than anything tourist-orientated or special. The parish church however was interesting, with a massive 12^{th/13th} century north-

west tower that was clearly defensible. The rest was mostly a 19th-century rebuild. Its greatest fame today is an automated carillon that plays tunes most of the day, and, one fears, most of the night as well.

Wednesday 15th September

Exploring to the east of Mouileron. First stop was Parthenay, the medieval heart of the town being sited on the end of a ridge overlooking the Thouet. Parking was difficult – it was market day – but we eventually found a place and made our way to the Porte de la Citadelle, a massive medieval gatehouse topped by a clock and huge bell. The street beyond has one fine Romanesque church – St Croix – and the more elaborate western façade of another, Notre Dame de la Couldre, before ending at the Castle, a scatter of ruined towers (one big complete circular one at the south-west corner) around a large empty space. Then down to the river, and the Pont et porte St Jacques, another excellent medieval gatehouse that makes a superb photograph reflected in the waters of the river. South from here up the medieval main street, the Rue de la Vau St Jacques, with lots of timber-framed houses on stone ground floors.

Then west again, fast straight roads, towards Poitiers. We knew we were entering Jurassic country with potential for fossils, and I fantasised about ammonite sites – the massive pile of recently-quarried loose rock lying produced by road works.... then, behold, there it was! just as in the dream, on the north of the road just before Vouille 12 km short of Poitiers. Despite blazing sun, highly-inappropriate footwear and the lack of any tools, made a decent haul in an hour or so, largely, it has to be admitted, the cast offs of others who obviously dig there at times. With hammer, chisel and a bar this would rival Kettlewell at its best...

Finally, to Poitiers, and a multi-storey car park – thankfully cheaper than most English ones. This is the place to gross out – as I believe the term is – on the Romanesque. Notre Dame, a white limestone church in the very centre, has a stupendous western façade displaying, left to right, cartoon strip style, the Fall and Redemption of Man including an ex-Scriptural but very charming take on Mary and Joseph bathing the infant Christ. Then through narrow streets downhill to the Cathedral, a vast building with its Romanesque just turning to Gothic and, oddly in this area, a vast slab of a quite apse-less east end. A few metres away is the baptistery of St John, a 5th century building with more modern (ie 6th and 7th century) additions and alterations, somewhat restored, and now a museum with a vast collection of Merovingian sculpture including many many grave slabs, some showing what looked to be obvious stylistic links to English cross slabs supposedly several centuries later in date. The only frustration, that photographs (for once) were not permitted, was offset by the fact that a journal with illustrations of them all was available at a relatively modest price, although the text was, bien sur, in Français.

Down towards the river St Radegund's church was again Romanesque, and contained a crypt with the tomb of St Radegund herself. One last church, St Hilarie, but to find this we opted for a slog along by the river which with rush hour and a million cars, and road crossings in the most inconvenient places, was a bit purgatorial. Eventually we got there, and it was good. Despite its western three bays being entirely a mid-19th century rebuild, this is the strangest of churches, with additional arcades implanted in the 12th century when the 11th-century wooden roof was replaced by a stone vault. The result in the end is six parallel Romanesque arcades, a veritable forest of piers further confused by side chapels and an ambulatory around the eastern apse; a strange and wonderful place.

Teatime was overdue; the streets still being traffic-clogged, we took our food in a restaurant beside the multi-storey- good as ever, except that afterwards we planned to revisit that roadside rock-heap and I could hear des petits ammonites qui chantons a moi (especially after a half litre of vin rouge) and la nuit was tombe rapidement by the time we got away. Rock heaps in the dark, especially when one has a distressing tendency to fall over one's own feet, are not a good idea. Nevertheless, their song continued all the way home and into bed that night.

Thursday 16th September.

A second 'quiet' day; in the morning Elaine found a supermarket in La Chataigneraie and I continued writing up and drawing the house. In the afternoon we sallied forth to a few miles to the north-west and La Priore de Chassay-Grammont, a little Grandmonitine house that, despite quite extensive recent restoration (the vaulted frater was more or less a rebuild) still retains much of its original character. The Grandmonitines were a small and troubled order, committed to poverty and spirituality, with lay brothers to hand to do the non-spiritual necessities; this of course caused problems, as did a hierarchy with a predilection for storing up 'treasures' on earth. A final scandal involving an 18th-century bishop who sold off and melted down the said treasures to pay off debts ended up in the order being dissolved by the Pope a few years prior to the Revolution, but this priory had already been abandoned and turned into a farm by then. The farmer re-roofed the church (after the collapse of its vault) and apparently used it as a private chapel. It is the simplest of buildings – an apse with three windows at the east end, a lancet in the west gable, a south-west door for the lay brothers and one on the north (into the cloister) for the monks.

A few km to the north-east lay the hill-top village of Pouzages. The Chateau had just closed (it being the end of the season) but the bailey was still accessible, ringed with a partly-overgrown curtain and sundry ruined towers, but beside the gatehouse a huge 12th-century donjon stood, with round-angled turrets at the corners and midway along each side. The village usefully contained a hardware supermarket in which a big chisel (the ammonites were still calling) cost the same as four AA batteries – strange country!. And a mile or so away, on the road back down to Mouilleron, was the village of Pouzages-le-Vieux with yet another wonderful church; aisleless 11th century nave and late 12th/early 13th century eastern parts and central tower. In the nave were early medieval frescoes including a set of the labours of the months, in parts wonderfully-well preserved. The church is built of granite, and the nave floored with old and worn granite grave slabs; walking east they all look worn smooth, but turning back west, and seeing them against the evening sunlight flooding in from the west window, designs leap out – a four-circle cross here, a shield there, a 16th or 17th inscription, a book and a chalice.... Outside pigeons were filling up the ledges and window sills of the tower, and a strangely melodious chattering proved to emanate from two starling-like birds on the west gable, more spattered with white than their British cousins. Don't have a bird book but the camera (starting to misbehave, which is a bit worrying) nevertheless provided a good record.

Friday 17th September

A trip south to the Vendee marshlands and beyond them the port of La Rochelle. But as ever, you can not go anywhere here without stumbling over amazing diversions on the way. The first amazing diversion here was Vouvant, only a few km south of Mouilleron, a walled village on a bluff above a river with one tall round tower remaining from its chateau and a stunning church with a Romanesque double portal in the gable end of its north transept displaying the usual riot of scripture-cum-bestiary above and around highlights of the story of Samson within the tympanum itself. The church also had a crypt under the chancel, but its vault was all restoration, as was quite a bit of the above-ground fabric. Nieul-s-l'Autise has an abbey where again the Romanesque church is in fact mostly 19th-century restoration; the west front (but not the upper part of the tower that caps it), nave piers, south aisle of the nave and south transept are genuine. The monastic buildings, a separate ancient monument, only really survive in part (the cloister itself with galleries above, and the east range) but the state-of-the-art presentation (here and at Maillezais) makes up for that; the visitor walks on glass floors with patterns projected from beneath, past medieval instruments hanging in space on near-invisible strings, that play as you pass them. In the north walk of the cloister some interesting Romanesque tomb slabs, including a coped-and-tegulated specimen that would not have been out of place in County Durham.

By Maillezais one has arrived in the marshlands proper. The abbey/cathedral/fortress is a vast site and an impressive one. Enclosed within a wall and ramparts (with a bishop's palace at the north-east corner thrown in for good measure) much of the monastery is reduced to footings or subterranean basements. What survives is the Romanesque westwerk and the north wall of the nave, and the Gothic north transept, ruined but standing to full height. All else is marked out foundations, except for intact ranges on the south and east of a second cloister away to the south-east, which housed lay brothers and a guest house; here a spectacular audiovisual is played every couple of hours, brief but worth waiting for.

Then south to the main Niort to La Rochelle dual carriageway, and thus more hastily west (frustratingly passing a sign to a Grace Dieu Abbey). La Rochelle is a major city, with lots of traffic and parking problems. We managed to find a spot where we could spend a couple of hours near the Eglise St Saveur, with the footings of a big round tower, part of the city defences, poking through the pavement nearby. Nearby we found a Protestant Museum, reached through a big 17th or 18th century church (that started off Catholic, now Eglise Reformee); in contrast to this morning's abbeys, a traditional museum, all old portraits and ephemera with nothing to explain the overall picture, dry dusty and redolent of past unpleasantnesses of man to man in the name of God. The most memorable relics were medallions like big coins with portraits that looked different whichever way up you held them, a pope whose triple crown became a triple collar on the neck of a grinning devil, and a priest similarly transformed into an old woman, clever but a bit sick. And a big print of the St Bartholomew's Eve massacre showing lots of people hitting each other with clubs and knives, and being thrown out of upstairs windows. Was the message (a) let us be inspired by heroic suffering for the faith or (b) the last time that lot did this to us so next time round we'll do it to them? Religion bloody religion.

Anyway, we soon escaped into the narrow streets and baking sun; looked for a hat but failed to find one cheap enough, and then paid 25 E for a UV filter for the camera – this seemed excessive, but we were not quite sure enough to complain in a foreign language. That sometime blessing-of-our-times, the internet, may allow some checking up here... Things looked up when we found a nice little tea shop, and were refreshed enough to sally forth alongside the Vieux Port, full of yachts, to the Tour St Nicholas, a huge 14th century structure, polygonal with all sorts of turrets, with big ribbed vaults inside and warrens of mural stairs and passages. PFR paid 4E for a quick snapping-all-the-way trip to the top, ELR waited. From the top excellent views along the sea defences, across the mouth of the port to the Tour de La Chaine, and then a straight curtain wall to the 15th-century Tour de la Lantern with a fine Gothic spire. Heading back for the car, good views across the port to the Porte de la Grosse Horloge, medieval gatehouse from port to town, capped by a Renaissance belfry.

Followed our noses north out of La Rochelle, eventually, to a brief stop at Esnandes with its fortified church; an extraordinary-looking structure (its west door with a multi-cusped arch looking distinctly Moorish-meets-Romanesque) but sadly locked; a bit of a run down area, the back streets fully of kids doing wheelies on their motor scooters. The flat marshlands gradually gave way to rolling fields again; stopped one last time at Ste Gemme-le-Plaine (just east of Luçon) which has yet another intriguing-looking church; photographed a wonderful mile-post in the village centre, which it turns out is typical of the Vendée. Back to Mouilleron in time to sketch the parish church in the last rays of sunset.

Saturday 18th September

PFR spent the whole day at Grainetière Abbey, whilst ELR went on the Puy du Fou theme park and paid 24€ to be entertained by various historical extravaganzas. The Abbey, Benedictine then and now once again, is lovely, on a relatively modest scale, a mixture of ruined bits and patched-up ranges inhabited by the present community. It feels a bit Cornish because most of the worked stone is, as the name suggests, granite. The first brother we met seemed in remonstrative mood; it was because we had put out two euros each in the box, and we should not have done as this was a free day; he gave us a free glossy guidebook instead. Like a couple of the others we have seen this ended up a fortified abbey in the Hundred Years War, having drum towers grafted onto the southern angles of its monastic buildings. There is not much of the church; just the eastern sides of the transepts with their apsidal chapels, and the lower part of the south side of the nave. The east range is good, with a chapter house very tastefully converted into the present chapel; the south range has a bit at each end with a gap in the middle, and on the west there is a Romanesque cloister arcade with a (later) timber-framed gallery above, although the range behind (guest house) has gone, the big tower at its south-west corner now standing virtually detached. In the cloister walk were various architectural pieces, including a much-mutilated limestone effigy of a local lord with a child by his side. One highly diverting detail was the fact that the child's feet had rested on a plinth supported by a big real-live, or rather real-fossilised ammonite, an in-situ feature utilised by the mason. Wonderful. One brother spoke a little English; despite obviously feeling a bit sore about the protestants that had knocked his abbey around so much, thought it 'a scandal' that all Christians could not share communion (but don't tell 'them' he said so!) and also begged England to stay with Europe and not go with America. I wholeheartedly agreed.

Got quite lost finding our way back to Mouilleron, but did find the village of Le Boupere with its unique fortified church; the Hundred Years War (15th century) again. Lacking a castle, the local people seem to have fortified the church to use as a communal retreat. Gunloops cover the west door, which is overhung by a machicolated gallery (why is its stonework painted green?) with a peculiar roof of lead strips, between conical-roofed bartizans; there are more machicolations on the side walls.

Sunday 19th September

Up early because the village was having its equivalent of the great British car boot sale – in France they are called a 'Vid-Grenier', 'Empty Attic' – at the local sports centre. Even by 9.00am there was an impressive array of tables; within seconds of arriving saw a laser level, just the thing I needed for the survey of the house, at a mere 5€. Strange that in GB, five years ago an equivalent piece of equipment would have cost £500; this one is very like the one I bought at home for £50 last year. Tempered by, by ELR would not allow, two glorious pieces of kitsch, a letter rack in the form of a cat and, best of all, a coat stand topped by a giant poodle's head. Then the fact that it was Sunday reasserted itself, and we went to church, as did most of the village – it was packed. Services do lose a little when you cannot understand the language and are not supposed to take communion, it has to be admitted.

After lunch, and a bit of levelling and surveying round the house, sallied forth to neighbouring villages. First of all, back to Vouvant; the Tower of Melusine was open, with half the world ascending and descending; after numerous excusez-mois and waits on the stairs we got to the top and back; also had a look at an uninspired art exhibition, very sub-Piscasso in the detached western section of the church, which is simply a roofed-over ruin. Then on to Mervent, where the map showed an important church – in fact it was far less important than Vouvant (not distinguished on the map) but nevertheless interesting, with a supposedly 10th-century nave (nothing remaining other than archaic-looking fabric) with everything expanding to the east. Mervent is looped round by a section of the river which has been dammed to produce narrow lakes, and like Vervent is very popular at weekends. We then turned east and found a better church at Foussais-Payre (which we had driven past on Friday), with some spectacular Romanesque stuff at the west end and an extensive Gothic body that had suffered badly in the various troubles and lost its stone vaults, to be replaced by an odd wooden substitute, still of some age. The church was full of visitors, with queues to go up the tower (at the north-west corner of the nave); we waited our turn, and ascended to find a local giving talks on the 1930s' clock. So did not stay, but did get a good view of the interesting roof structure above the wooden vault, all so well lit that it photographed very easily. Over the road in a miniature Halle (market hall) was a display including a beautiful model of the village

centre in c 1900, including little figures of all the residents, each with a one-line cartoon-like text of what they might have been saying. Searched in vain for a cafe, so turned for home; PFR got excited by one more church, at Puy-de-Serre, an attractive little 13th-century building with an aisleless nave, very Romanesque apse (with windows just pointed) and a south tower and a south-east chapel.

Back to Mouilleron and a quick look at the Manoir du Vigneau just to the north of the village, a defensible courtyard house with a very picturesque gateway dated '1624' and ranges with lots of round-arched windows. And finally up a rough road onto the ridge east of Mouilleron but south of the main road, which in the 19th century was a veritable wind farm; there is one highly picturesque cluster of three windmills (one still with the remains of its sails) and a windmill-chapel (perhaps built as a chapel, mimicking a truncated windmill), with a few hundred metres further on another pair, one that now has a flat top and one very ruined. Millstones are scattered around on the ground, and two of the western group of mills have huge decaying balks of timber proper up to stop them spinning round in high winds.

Monday 20th September

This was to be a geological day, back to the roadside rock-mound for fossil hunting in the morning and visiting the Subterranean River of Champdeniers-St-Denis in the afternoon. The first part of the day went pretty well according to plan, with slow lorries and tractors making the long road east a bit longer. ELR sat and read, PFR had three hours of scrambling around and chipping until his back ached; the big one, the museum-quality specimen, proved elusive (there are a frustrating number of imprints suggesting that other people have found them) but there were still some pretty nice smaller ones worth the trip. Then back to Champdeniers, to find that the Paradise Cafe had passed authority over the cave to the local Marie (town hall) with the inevitable result that it had been closed to visitors; the lady at the Marie could not tell us why, we would have to get in contact with local speleos to find out any more. Annoying; we went and peered through a padlocked gate into a big gloomy tunnel leading into the darkness towards sounds of running water. However, just above was a fine parish church, Romanesque aisled nave and Gothic east end, above a fine Romanesque crypt; on the steps to the crypt our torches, specially purchased for the Subterranean River, came in handy. There were also two or three cross slabs around, inscribed C16 and C17 ones and an older one re-used as a bench in the porch, just as happens in England. Then north to St Marc la Lande, to see an ancient monument variously signed as a Commandery, College and Abbey. It turned out to be an establishment, perhaps with English parallels, of the small Antonine order who were formed to treat sufferers from a specific medieval disease caused by eating fungoid grain. Basically there was a church, the usual buttressed rectangle (no apse) in a flamboyant late medieval Gothic (the west end especially fancy) perhaps with a cloister on the north, although only its east range was intact. This housed art exhibitions, and was open (free), and despite its much-altered exterior contained some high-quality medieval stuff including a stair with the 'newel notches' that have aroused Victorian-style antiquarian controversy in England. The 'cloister' was now a garden of herbs such as the Antonins might have used in their treatment of the sick; the wall of the church facing it was all blocked arches and ragged remnants of cut-away walls and vaults, whilst at its foot lay two more cross slabs, in granite, both with emblems – one a spade(?) and the other an open book. This holiday is showing that use of 'English-style' cross slabs did extend across much of France, as one would only expect given the close cultural and ecclesiastical links during the relevant period.

We could not get back to Mouilleron without getting lost once more in the typical French way. The Michelin 1cm:2.5 km map showed, very clearly, a road heading west from St Marc, to soon intersect a more major north-south one which would take us up to Secondigny. So we took what was undoubtedly the westward road, straight from the village centre, correctly aligned with the west front of the church it; it wound around, past several small offshoots that looked like farm tracks, and ended up in La Boissiere, north-east of St Marc. The map is beautifully printed, has a glossy card cover, had cost us £4.49 back in England and – there is no way round it – simply appears to be wrong. Boissiere to Scondigny entailed going through Allonne, and, thankfully there were signs for that. We followed them, and got there, but the roads and junctions on the way again bore absolutely no resemblance to what was shown on the map. It is as bad as trying to follow our own Ordnance Survey on minor roads in Ireland, which have sunk into the bog since being surveyed around 1830. All these villages, by the way, have exciting-looking churches, usually Romanesque, but one member of the party would not tolerate further diversions leaving the other regretful.

Arrived back to Mouilleron to greet Martin and Ginni and also Ginni's cousin and family, so the house is suddenly fully occupied.

Tuesday 21st September

A final and as it turned out frustrating day of rushing around visiting things – in retrospect not a good idea. West from Mouilleron past Chantonay to La-Roche-sur-Yon, and just beyond it the abbey of Fontenelles, shown in the road book, but which really took some finding – although when we eventually found the route it was signposted. The abbey is now a farm, and visitor access is restricted to the exterior; a pity as the church is

largely still roofed. It is a severely plain early Gothic edifice with a truncated nave and ruinous south transept; the crossing tower, now with a gabled roof, has clearly been cut down as well. Glimpses of the interior through the broad lancet windows show that it is fully vaulted; managed to hold the camera high enough to get a view of the inside through the east window, chasing basking lizards in the process. There is a farmhouse and barn to the west which might incorporate the south side of the western part of the nave. Of the claustral buildings only the ruinous east range survives; one can get a decent look at the chapter house, which has a central pier and retains three quarters of its vault.

Then negotiated our way south-west down to the coast at St-Hilaire-la-Monte, which has a big ruined castle; 7E entry was a bit offputting, but the main reason we did not go in was that there were other abbeys to see – we thought. It did look a bit touricised; the adverts offered a recreation of a knight re-enacting tasks undertaken to ransom Richard the Lionheart. So down to the coast, and acres of sun-baked resort accommodation, and the Abbey of Lieu Dieu, a Premonstratensian house. Sadly it was closed for repairs, to be completed in 200- (no final figure); there was also no sign of the museum shown on the map. All that could be seen, from a distance, was one big north-south roofed range, perhaps late medieval, with to the west of it what looked as if it might have been a ruined and patched up gatehouse. The coastal road east from here was uninspiring and out of sight of the sea, we opted for an inland variation, a minor road through the marshland. At the village of Angles is an interesting Romanesque church with the unusual feature of a big carved bear standing on its west gable; there is a local legend explaining its presence, but one is reminded of the bears at the ends of Anglo-Scandinavian hogback grave covers, which are thought to present ‘a man’s last house’ and be modelled on wooden houses of the time with bears or bear’s heads as finials to their ridges. One of our regional guides described this as ‘an old abbey church’ but there seemed to obvious signs of a monastic origin.

East again, on a minor road across the marshes, is the 15th century tower of M built to guard a former port of the same name, but sadly the road was closed and we got only have got there by an inordinately long diversion. So we returned to the coastal or near-coastal main road, to St Michael - Hermes, where there is a Benedictine monastery – but here we failed again – the guidebook reference was unclear, and it turned out the monks only received visitors for a few days in July and August; high walls and trees screen the buildings from the village. So we ended up in Luçon, which is a pleasant enough little town with a minor cathedral; this was an abbey church in its earliest days, and a much-scraped Romanesque north transept survived. Most of the church was 14th and 15th century; the rather fine west tower and spire is 17th century and of some architectural merit, but was shrouded in scaffolding. On the south was a late medieval cloister, post-monastic. The searchlight glare of the late afternoon sun was such as to make photography almost impossible, lighting the white limestone walls to brightly for the eye to bear, or for either human or camera eye to adjust to the shadows.

One last church on the way back to Mouilleron, at Pouillé. More Romanesque work here in the nave, crossing tower and transepts, but an eastern arm of two big wide bays had been added in the early 14th century. By English standards there was still a lot of Romanesque feel in the extension, although the broad lancet-shaped windows and the capitals of the vaulting shafts were clearly Gothic. The nave had an interesting ceiling, a sort of a sub-barrel-vault in wood with painted decoration. And finally, through yet more village with picturesque and inviting old churches to Chantonay and its supermarket for half-a-dozen bottles of take-home wine.

Wednesday 22nd September

Home, after the Mouilleron carillon was video-clipped playing its hourly Ave Maria one last time. The by-now-familiar eastward road was relatively clear; would have had time for a brief reconnaissance of one last stone pile just short of Poitiers, but it turned out to be in the middle of a complex of modern roads with no legal place to stop. Remembered to fill up the hire car, a Peugeot 206 diesel, before leaving it at the airport with a note detailing its worrying habit of flashing ‘stop’ signs and warning bleeps whilst the engine warmed up. Otherwise as a vehicle it would be hard to fault (although a bit underpowered); fuel consumption seemed to be well over 20 km per litre, which seems to be in the seventies a gallon, so one can’t complain.

Left Poitiers in pleasant sun and just a hint of autumn cooling; an hour and a quarter of aerial transit enlivened early on by an aerial glimpse of Parthenay, and a little later one, through cloud, of Eastbourne and the kaleidoscopic pattern produced by a huge caravan site far below; descended through three separate levels of cloud to a moist and breezy Stansted, that airport-sans-limit.

Then a long and weary wait; the greatest pain being that the supposedly final call for our Newcastle flight went out early, whilst PFR was watching the highlights of, wonder of wonders!, England beating Australia in a one-day cricket match; dragged away from this marvellous spectacle, only to find the plane actually flew late, and we had over an hour of standing at the gate. However, the flight itself was OK, with a beautiful above-the-clouds sunset than a low pass over the lights of Newcastle at dusk and a gentle deposition on native soil. Met by Peter and Alma who had deposited us at the airport an eternity of a fortnight before, and returned to a noisy mewsome welcome from the waiting tribe of felines.