

Diary Francais of a Holidaying Antiquary , September 2006

Tuesday 6th September. Getting there

The sky-plane set us down on French soil at around quarter past five (here, quarter past six); after a grey September morning in Northumberland the heat was like the breath of an oven, although in truth probably no worse than that of a warm July day in England. Then followed a long trek along concrete walkways, following signs to the railway, trailing all we owned in wheeled cases, prepared by she-who-packs-all-things-into-small-spaces¹. Then followed a train journey through Paris, of only an hour or so, but purgatorial and stiflingly hot, full of noisy shouting people, and plunging underground so that we got barely a glimpse of the historic city centre. About thirty stops later arrived in Massy in the southern outskirts, all sixties and a bit Milton Keynesian sans concrete cows; taxi to the Hotel Comfort overlooking a big square and acres of open air shopping mall, but plenty of pavement cafes and big bunches of flowers on every lamp post. Ate outside the hotel (kids doing wheelies on bikes round us) ; that was pleasant but the night uncomfortably hot, so sleep fitful

Wednesday 7 September, when we meet St Benedict in his box

Ate as full a Continental breakfast as is humanly possible, then taxi ride to car hire, and off, on the wrong side of the road! Fortunately it was straight onto a motorway, so fairly mindless progress for 90 km south until the map reader got us lost for a while in an urban labyrinth, before regaining good fast road to our first port of call, St Benoit, which is a Francisation of St Benedict. This is where St Benedict is – or rather, what is left of him; the monks of the Abbey of Fleury retrieved him from where he was buried, at Monte Cassino in Italy, in 672. The whole story is carved above the north door of the Romanesque abbey church; he is now kept in a box in the candle-lit crypt, where visitors can still drop in for a quick venerate. It is a fine Romanesque church, the high spot being the west porch/tower which is early 11th century work, and has some superb carved capitals; it has three doorways on each side, and is modestly modelled on the New Jerusalem as it is described in the Book of Revelation. Benedict is in the crypt under the apsidal eastern arm, which is 11th century as well; the nave in between is later 12th century, but just going Gothic with pointed arches. The monastic buildings seems to have gone, but there are some fine medieval bits and pieces in the little town to the north including an externally-unprepossessing building(containing the public lavatories) which is in fact the medieval market hall (with a superb roof) and a house over the road to the north with superb late Romanesque windows. St Benoit is still a Benedictine monastery – plenty of black-robed monks around, chatting with female ecclesiastics. The boxed Benedict must exude good vibes; it seems a happy place.

A few miles down to road to Germigny-des-Prés, famed as a Carolingian church from the beginning of the 9th century. In its original form this had a central square tower with an apse on each side, the eastern one flanked by a pair of smaller ‘apsidoles’ and the western replaced by a more conventional nave in the 16th century. Sadly it was ‘restored’ in the 1840s, and this seems to have meant rebuilt. There is a superb mosaic on the dome of the eastern apse, which one hopes is really genuine, but as for the rest,

¹ In contrast, I can make three pencils, a rubber and an exercise book fill (and clutter) a sizeable drawing room

bar the odd capital (some inscribed) there does not seem a genuinely ancient stone in the place. Outside there is nothing to distinguish either coursed rubble masonry or ashlar dressings from the c1840 western extension of the nave. It just does not feel ancient.

Then across the Loire, and a southern bypass to Orleans, lots of straight roads through wooded countryside eventually bringing us to St Clery-St-Andre, a little town with a huge Gothic basilica towering over its roof tops. This church feels totally genuine, and in parts quite tatty and unrestored; it is all later medieval work, a lofty and well-lit nave with a whole series of chapels and sacristies opening off the aisles; from one vestry a wonderful spiral stair soared up to a high-level chamber in which the king would sit and look down, through a tiny shuttered window, on the services far below. The stair did not have a conventional newel but a fat twisting roll moulding nave, so looking down was like peering into the whorls of an ammonite.

Finally over the Loire again to Mer, and a comfortable chambre d'hote in an old town house with a lovely rear garden and two black-and-white cats. The little town has a church with a misfit late medieval tower, far too elaborate for the utilitarian body of the building (which looks like a later afterthought), and an up-and-down main street, pleasantly old and French without any buildings to rouse especial architectural excitement. Only one restaurant was open, but it was perfectly OK, three courses for 10 euros and a demi of vin rouge to encourage sleep.

Thursday 8th September. Trotting in the Magic Attic

Breakfast agreeable, albeit continentale and spiced with some odd slivers of fruit one would not normally encounter so early in the day. Then a brief look at a remarkable old building in the garden of our chambre d'hote, used as, and perhaps built as, a laundry – full of sheets hanging to air. It is timber-framed, with a king-post roof, with one side quite open beneath overhanging eaves that are almost a wall-less aisle; very quaint detail at the post-heads, where the ties are morticed into the posts. Then off and about our tourist business, east along the main road north of the river to the medieval town of Beaugency. Walls, 12th century gateways, a Romanesque abbey church and a chateau including a towering square 11th-century donjon and a later quadrangle of buildings including the odd round tower – all sadly closed for ‘travaux’ (works). The church claimed to have been rebuilt after being burned by ‘Calvinists’ in the 17th century (when theological groups were allowed to express their opinions in a forthright manner) but seemed largely late 12th century work (arches just going pointed) except for a timber vault. Outside a warren of streets showed a variety of ancient houses, some timber-framed; in the corner of one square the smaller Church of St Etienne (now a cultural centre; closed as an exhibition was being set up, but we were allowed in), a simple cruciform building, rudimentary Romanesque with tunnel vaulting on plain square-section transverse arches, apses to eastern end and transepts and a simple (later?) crossing tower.

Then, after a brief excursion into Super U, a roadside supermarket, a few miles east again, Orleans-ward, and Meung. This has a big collegiate church, again Romanesque-just-going-Gothic, with a soaring west tower and spire. As usual lots of apses at the east end, but here the transepts were round-ended as well, and the interior was a delight. Attached to the south side of the tower was the ruined shell of a larger

one, with two round turrets, and a little beyond was the Chateau, a former Episcopal residence. Privately owned, it is undergoing restoration; admission 7 euros, but worth every cent. A wonderful place. It manages to contrive a spreading façade facing the park to the south-west, that achieves some sort of symmetry, but round towers with conical roofs keep appearing, and outlines of big medieval windows amongst the more ordered rows of 18th century ones. It looks big, but one realises the whole place is rarely more than one room deep; the rear elevation, towards the church and town, is much more irregular, with more medieval towers. Inside you follow arrows on the walls, but soon lose any sense of direction; at first there are lots of furnished rooms, with plenty of mannequins (eg a bride in a wedding dress in the chapel), but then one winds up in the attics, after a wonderful notice on the wall, the English version of which is worthy quoting verbatim...

‘Come with us in this beautiful adventure to trott you in this magic attic where you will be able with your liking to dream of last time. Raise well the eyes, Albert and Cecile, the hosts of this place, will make you discover the imposing frame in chestnut of the castle. David, who opened, cleaned and installed wiring for sound for you, wishes you one moment of happiness’

Who could resist? A stunning medieval roof is now equipped with psychedelic lighting and sound effects (mostly a raging thunderstorm). But even this is not enough; one descends again to the basements to find an exhibition of vintage bath tubs, and then plunges into subterranean passages including a supposed Romanesque chapel, a few skulls and stuffed prisoners, and more of David’s light and sounds; he seems to have a thing about thunderstorms and pouring rain.

The Chateau of Meung is a hard act to follow. After bread and cheese on the grassy sward overlooking the mill race below the town, we crossed the broad waters of the Loire to Crely-St-Andre (again) and headed west on the south bank, past Mar, and, after some unintentional meandering, into Bloir, a much larger town, the heart of which is back on the north side. This has a much more famous chateau, a royal one his time, arranged around a big courtyard well above the river. The oldest part, a large 13th century hall, was closed for ‘travaux’; the rest of it is of c1500 onwards, with some spectacular early Renaissance work (partly in brick), and a big mid-18th century Classical wing. There is a wonderful carved stone spiral stair in an open turret, but inside the c1500 wing one elaborate painted interior after another became a little tedious, everything was just so over-the-top, with a deadness that seems to accompany the handiwork of the immensely rich. Being French royalty, the Chateau was of course the scene of much intrigue and skulduggery; Catherine de Medici’s bed-chamber has secret chambers in its panelling, allegedly for her collection of poisons; nearby was the scene of the assassination of the Duke de Guise in 1588, who had been plotting to seize power. We were treated to a 1908 silent movie re-creating this event, presumably intended as serious art at the time but now pure slapstick involving the eight assassins (overacting to a man), the assassinated Duke (whom at one stage they try and burn in the fireplace) and a hysterical female who rushes around and swoons. This gem apart, the whole place is a bit frustrating, over-grand and now over-restored.

Down into the town, and S Nicholas, another late Romanesque church – like Beaugency an abbey, but, as often here, the monastic buildings all rebuilt. This one had two western towers, and a circular dome over the crossing, along with a later

chapel that replaced the central apse of the east end; the interior is rather gloomy. Were these places once full of monuments? In the stone paved floor, I could find only one possible grave stone, a tapering slab worn into illegibility. Nearby was the 'Jacobins', claiming to be a 13th-century monastery but now a museum of religious art which the custodian insisted was 'ferme' although it was a good twenty minutes before the official closing time of 1800.

Elaine, by now foot-weary, opted to sit in a public garden and read 'Le Monde' ; the letters page included one from someone who, heroically, felt it their public duty to explain to the French the technicalities of ball-tampering in English cricket, which was fun to translate. PFR walked over the great bridge to the southern suburb with its Church of St Saturnin, a strange building with only its western bay standing to full height; the rest had been cut off (and given a new vault) directly above the arcades, which gave the interior a strange effect, evening sunlight streaming into the west end, and the remainder a low shadowy tunnel. One big stained glass window had an epic depiction of a mid-19th century flood, all in sepia like an old photograph, showing the inhabitants taking refuge on the bridge and all manner of debris being swept beneath. Just across the road west of the church is the 'cloitre de S Saturnin', actually an enclosed graveyard with timber arcades all round, but sadly it was open by special appointment only. Walked west along the river bank to get a photograph of S Nicholas and the Chateau, across the water, their west fronts lit by the sinking sun.

Back east again, seeking reasonably-priced food; eventually found a roadside auberge that was OK but not great, just short of the bridge across the Mer.

Saturday 9th September . Chateaud out

Took our leave of an excellent chamber d'hote in Mer (after PFR sketched the timber-framed laundry) and followed a big tour bus through Mer's narrow streets, over the Loire, and then the ten km to Chambord. Chambord out-chateaus all other chateaus; it is really an immense hunting lodge built by King Francois I; Leonardo da Vinci is, quite credibly, thought to have had a hand in the design (although this is not proven, and Leonardo in fact died before building commenced in 1519). The design is certainly something very special; its centre piece is an immense square 'keep' with a conical-roofed round tower at each corner. So far so Gothic and castle-like, but the whole thing is Renaissance in style, with big windows down to ground level – a mansion, not a fortress. On each of the three floors is a symmetrical cruciform arrangement of vestibules with a free-standing double-helix stair at the centre, around which are four suites of rooms, a large square one within the main body of the building and smaller ones within the adjacent corner tower. On the second floor the vestibules have coffered vaults (every compartment with either the F of Francois or a crowned salamander, his symbol; only a little less silly than the omnipresent porcupine at Blois), and above that is the roof terrace. The keep, however, goes on up from here, and it is the spectacular roof-works that make Chambord unique. The angle tower have, as already mentioned, tall conical spires; the adjacent rooms have tall hip-ended roofs, and the central stair is carried on up, and a long way up, as a smaller stair within a central spire; all these rise alongside a forest of pavilions and ridiculously ornate stacks; one would waste words trying to describe it any further, it just has to be seen. The skyline of a house was a status symbol – you see it in the moulded parapets

and stepped battlements of even humble Border towers – but here skyline (and virtually everything else) is taken to excess.

The keep stands in the centre of the north side of a big rectangular courtyard, and is flanked by further three-storey L-plan ranges with more big round tower at their external northern angles. The north-west range was centred on the chapel, and the northern-east one on Francois personal lodgings; apparently the symbolism was to indicate that the king considered himself an equal with the deity. Both have open-plan spiral stairs in their inner angles. The remainder of the quadrangle is enclosed by single-storey ranges, with single-storey roundels like the bases of unfinished towers at the outer southern angles.

One could write about Chambord for days, but there is no need. There is plenty of literature available, even a guide in good English, and a splendid audiovisual explaining the planning and building history. It was apparently a desperately uncomfortable place to live; in the depths of winter it is much colder inside than out. To keep warm necessitated running about all day chasing deer and wild boar, and burning huge fires all night. In between occasional visits by the king and his retinue, the place was just locked up, the damp got in and it deteriorated quickly. Restoration is forever ongoing.

And so away, through acres of parkland, on the road south and south-west towards the distant Vendee. First real stop was at S Aignan, another typical medieval town, on a steep hill, with a chateau dominating the skyline and a big Romanesque church just below. The chateau is now private houses, but one can get a good look at it by plodding up a grand stone staircase between crumbling balustrades; it is a joyous hotchpotch of medieval, Renaissance, and 19th-century Gothic. The church still has the omnipresent text ‘LIBERTE, EGALITE, FRATERNITE’ incised by a revolutionary hand in the ashlar of the western of its two towers. The ground falls steeply eastwards, allowing a crypt beneath its eastern battery of apses, and the crypt still has its 12th-century all paintings; pressing a button gains one a commentary (in a language of choice) synchronised with lighting. The sprawl of little streets beneath the church include some fine timber-framed houses.

Soon began to run out of time. Montresor has another chateau, early medieval in parts, but there just was not time to look at it. Nearby we did find the Priory of Grandmont Villiers, and that was too good to miss. It is signed both as a priory and as a hermitage; three monk/hermits live there today, and one happily took an hour of his time to show us round. Having lived there since 1974 he knew his building well and despite having little English, with Elaine as translator, managed to communicate many of its subtleties. The Grandmonitines were very strict and ordered, and their monasteries small, a tight little group of buildings around a cloister with a simple rectangular church on the north. This one, having been used as a barn, had lost its usual eastern apse, its western bay and its vault; however the present community have lovingly restored it to use. The east and south ranges survive, the former with some remarkable monolithic window heads, with a toothed extrados into which outer voussoirs could be slotted, making them look like half a stone cog wheel. There are said to be parallels in a Crusader Castle in the Lebanon, the story being that a local knight brought the idea back here. However, all else is very simple; the chapter house capitals only have rudimentary foliage sculpture, the original windows are simple

round-arched openings. The Grandmonitines finally folded in the 18th century, cheated out of their possessions by a bishop who needed money for a new palace; some of their treasures survive, in museums or spirited away to the United States (the hermit clearly regretted this), the abode of this world's equivalent of Francois I, the ruler who would be equal with God. Their little priory remains, a good and necessary antidote to being blinded by the wonders of the Chambords.

We really did not have time for anything else, but only a kilometre or so down the road chanced upon a wonderfully picturesque group of old buildings that it was simply impossible to drive past. This was Corroirie. At first they did not make any sense at all; a range with a gatehouse and remains of round towers, a chapel on the ground floor of a lofty apse-ended block, some vaulted chambers with a deep open drain (rere dorter?) at one end, but no sign of a recognisable monastic plan. This was in fact the lay brother's house linked to the Carthusian monastery of Liget (which we passed just a little further along the road); if you think English Carthusian houses, of the two in Somerset the surviving chapel at Witham is in fact the lay brother's one, whilst the chapel block here is oddly reminiscent of the chapter house block at Hinton. There were mills and industrial buildings here as well; it was the economic base to provide the revenues that supported the monks growing their own souls in holy seclusion within the monastery proper. The Cistercians kept monks and lay brothers separate, but shared the same church; the Grandmonitines, as our hermit-friend assured us, accepted them, without any segregation, as members of the same community

Then it was foot-down time, at first squinting into a lowering sun, but then a welcome cloud bank rose in the west as the light faded. We opted for the minor roads rather than a motorway thrash; French minor roads are generally better than English ones; being foreigners we kept, more or less, to the statutory 90 kph limit; locals obviously do not, but the long straight roads meant that they could safely overtake and burn off into the distance. Arrived in Mouilleron 21.20, weary.

Sunday 10th September. Mouilleron and not far beyond

Largely a crashed-out day, in Martyn and Gini's very pleasant house; would have gone to Mass but, surprisingly, there is only one in the village alternate weeks; previous experience suggests a shortage of priests rather than congregation. Too hot to sit and sketch in the village square, so late afternoon had a brief drive out to look at a couple of old churches. S Pierre at Reaumur, just 5 km north of Mouilleron, has a central tower and a chancel with huge buttresses and bartizans capping its eastern angles; there are also odd cylindrical rubble buttresses at the west end of the largely C19 nave as well. Notre Dame at Vieux Pouzages we saw two years ago; a cruciform building with a central tower, supposedly C11 remodelled at the end of the C12, but the two phases are a bit difficult to sort out. Footings of an apse on the east of the south transept. The church is best known for its C12 wall paintings in the nave; much of the interior is dingy and green-stained. Virtually the whole floor is early grave slabs; they are granite, like the church. A few have crosses and various emblems – sword, chalice, book etc and others C16 or C17 inscriptions. Sketched a few.

Monday 11th September. PFR gets lost

A rather inconsequential day. Morning ELR did a supermarket run and PFR sketched and wrote around the house; in the afternoon he sallied forth alone, managing to get to Pouzages where the chateau was shut (despite a queue of would-be visitors waiting for it to open), and then getting himself lost for rather a long time on very minor roads, most of which were not shown on the map. Brown signs at length led to another chateau, which turned out to be private, and then stumbled across a third, at Ardelay just south of Le Herbiers – a moated mound with a circular bailey on it, and one big tower beside the gatehouse. Although the bailey was open the castle as closed, with no indication of opening times. Eventually found Granitiere Abbey, which was just as beautiful as it had been two years before, and a friendly monk who chatted (in English) for quarter of an hour or so, and bequeathed the surprising information that there was a medieval tradition that having an ammonite gave one extra points for entry into Heaven (there is a knight's effigy here incorporating a real-in situ one), quite, er, a heartening thought for someone with a house full of the things.

Tuesday 12th September. Fossils and the Futuroscope

A different day, first to a more remote past than usual, and then to the future, or at least its supposed brink. East down the long road through Parthenay towards Poitiers, through lots of little places with interesting-looking old churches one does not have the time to stop and look at, getting held up behind lumbering lorries, to Veuille, or rather a big heap of stones by the road a couple of km short of Veuille, that we found in 2004 (to get to it you turn off left to a hamlet called Frozens, then right again on a road that now goes under the main trunk road) for a brief foray into the Jurassic. An ammonite hunt, of course – and within five minutes found a succulent specimen that was at least as good as any from last time; thinner pickings thenceforth, and after an hour or so PFR was hot, dusty and sweaty and ELR had gathered blackberries from the hedge and read her book, so onto Planet Futuroscope; a little north of Poitiers, this is a sort of theme park (not cheap! 31 E each) with a series of very modernistic buildings in the form of huge spheres, tilted blocks, and even a bunch of quartz crystals – containing cinemas of various types, dedicated to producing images that persuade one they are reality, through things like immense screens, 3-D glasses, and moving seats. All great fun and very well done, but one can have sensation overload. All a bit more educational than it would have been in England, one would suspect; at one point there was a big open-air display of superb photographs taken on a dog-sled trip through Siberia which, albeit low-tech, was one of the highlights. Non-stop pop music from a million speakers was less welcome. On a busy day we would have had to queue everywhere, but it was quiet – car parks maybe no more than one tenth full, although there still seemed droves of people around. Not many Brits evident, save (presumably) one man in a T-shirt with 'FLINTOFF SIX' on the back. Everything wound up with a display at nightfall, over one of the lakes, with moving images projected onto curtains of fine spray. Could have done without the hearty cheerleader who shouted at us all for ten minutes at the start, and the quite incomprehensible story line (which seemed very much a French take on Doctor Who) but the sleight-of-mind visuals, flashing lights, loud music and eventual firework display were all pretty stunning. The French do these things well. The satisfied crowd exited very efficiently (to the for-once appropriate strains of 'Smoke on the Water'), and we were soon following our headlight beam back to Mouilleron; arrived (90 km) an hour and three quarters from the end of the show, not bad.

Wednesday 13th September. The Pouzauges Chateau circular.

Morning in Mouilleron, PFR sketching round the village. Afternoon out, another attempt to visit the Chateau at Pouzauges, and succeeded! It was worth it. The donjon is really quite splendid, a five-storeyed keep with round-cornered turrets, at the corners and midway along each side wall, divided internally by a cross-wall; on the south are three levels of vaulted chambers, and on the north two. Some of the internal features, such as fireplace and windows with window seats, are the product of a 15th century remodelling. As well as the keep there are quite extensive remains of the gatehouse and curtain wall studded with towers, in part conserved and in part ragged and overgrown.

Then to La Flocelliere, with an extremely picturesque chateau – only the gardens open, but this includes the ruined part of the building. The D-plan donjon, set in the centre of the front of the inner ward and now separated from other medieval buildings, is now part of the house; it is of C13 date, with a C15 stair turret, spectacularly corbelled out at the top, to the rear. Most of the west side of the inner ward, with its angle towers, and rather less of the east, survive as ruins. The east range of the outer ward, on the south, is an 17th-century orangery remodelled in the 19th century to form the present house, with a round tower at its south end; the south-west corner, with another circular tower, is also extant. A 19th-century wing with open Gothic arcades in its ground floor links the orangery wing and the donjon.

A kilometre or two to the north-east, still in pleasant wooded hilly country, to Chateauroux. Right on the crossroads in the village is a late medieval house (Le Grand Logis de Chateauroux as the regional guide pamphlet calls it, before giving a brief description that is, in its English translation, completely incomprehensible. Anyway, it is a late medieval house with some moulded windows and a doorway with an overlight. Just beyond, up the hill, is the chateau itself; a ring of old houses incorporate the curtain wall, but entry is still by the roofless medieval gatehouse, and within is the shell of a 12th-century donjon, very like Pouzauges in plan, but without any vaults, and apparently just standing two storeys high above a low basement.

On another hilltop a couple of km to the north is the village of Les Chatelliers with an interesting church that preserves a 12th-century west door (inside a lean-to porch) but is mostly later medieval. Everything granite, except for a limestone cross slab which seemed to have its head missing, and would have been around 2.5 m long. A friendly local tried to engage PFR in conversation, and, doubtless, relay to him vital historical and architectural information, but sadly the linguistic divide prevailed.

Finally through the teeming traffic of Les Herbes, and a chats-et-chiens rainstorm, to vespers at La Grainitiere, where the language did not matter so much. And an ancient white cat, curled up against the chapter house/chapel window, managed to purr in a completely translingual manner.

Thursday 14th September. To the Marshes and the Sea

PFR and madame in the bakers played the game. Deux pain, s'il vous plait; non, not the pain-comme-un-pole-telegrafique, those pain there (points). Un tranché (he had learned this bit). Success; she sliced one, and put it in a polybag, then uttered a phrase.

PFR blank. She lowered her voice 'It's still warm, make sure you open the bag when you get it home'. Ah, oui! Merci! Au revoir!

After some debate, another driving day, to the west and the sea coast. Quite a bit of good dual carriageway gets one around and past La Roche sur-yon and then Challans, to the coastal marshlands. First part of call a massive water tower that styled itself The Chateau d'Eau; after looking at an exhibition, explaining water, one is catapulted aloft in a lift to the viewing gallery 72 m aloft, with tremendous views over the flat lands, the bounding dunes and coast beyond; lots more informative material and buttons to push to hear explanations in a language of ones choice. Nearby was the Ecomusee du Daviaud, sort of a mini-Beamish amongst the marshes, with one real 18th-century farmhouse and a whole series of re-erected (or newly-built) structures in the local vernacular, with clay or reed walls and reed thatch. All very well done, and very photogenic.

Then to our furthest west, the Ile de Noirmoutier (only a true island at low tide), which was interesting but a bit frustrating because the Chateau, which looked thoroughly medieval and interesting had travaux and was closed to visitors (until next May). Managed a glimpse of the bailey and early donjon as a lorry went in. Nearby the church of St Philbert is 12th-century but has suffered many vicissitudes; its lofty central tower is mid-19th century Romanesque and rather overdone. It also had a couple of coach loads of elderly visitors inside, being guided around or lectured around. It does have a crypt where the deceased St Philbert once was, but he has since moved on. Coffee in a harbourside bar was dear – E5.80 – and came with a square of sticky white nougat with nuts in it – which PFR ate but ELR declined. A bit chewing-gummish but OK.

Left the Ile by the Passage du Gois, 3 km of tidal causeway, with refuges etc, very like the Holy Island one, except that it was jammed with people – traffic creeping because so many were pulling off onto the adjacent sand to park – most of whom were digging holes and clutching buckets, not at play but driven by the very French gastrolust to find things they can EAT.

Onshore again at Beauvoir sur Mer, which has an excellent and much more authentic Romanesque church, and through a maze of winding roads through green and wooden countryside to the Abbaye de l'Ile Chauvet, omitted for some reason from most maps we had seen, perhaps through a conspiratorial desire to make visitors think they have discovered it. Discreet little roadside signs do point the way, to 'parking' which is just a patch of grass beside a minor road, and then a muddy path, bordered by a couple of ropes, meandering into a horse-chestnut. Very strange! One suddenly emerges from the trees beside a 19th-century house, where madam met us and took our 4.5 E entry, and then led us on to the abbey itself, which is a delight. The cruciform aisleless church has a superb late Romanesque west door, with a deeply moulded pointed arch on four orders of jamb shafts, under a hood with interlace. Only the south transept has gone, along with the adjacent east range, which seems to have been remodelled in the 18th century during a final monastic phase. The west and south ranges – with a little gap between them – are still roofed, the former now having art exhibitions and a friendly sculptor-in-residence (who was very proud of having made an exact cast of his own foot) and the latter a museum. It claimed to be the monastic dormitory, and to have a 12th-century roof, both perhaps dubious claims but never mind. The south

range was surely the refectory; its roof (slender king-posts, long arch braces either side) was a splendid piece of carpentry, and did have Romanesque-style chip-carved patterns, but was it quite that early? Not sure.

Sat and sketched; it was too beautiful a place to leave in a hurry. Then tried to navigate a route back east, avoiding the main road. OK you cannot trust the map to show everything, but the sun in the sky must be fairly west by now, and of course each village has a church to orientate oneself. Well, at La Garnache, just north-east of Challans, there is a big 19th-century pseudo-Romanesque basilica, filling the village square, big apse one end, tower and porches the other, but it is **the wrong way round**. How can this be? Was this a secret French RC branch of the Quakers, who delighted in overturning ecclesiastical tradition? Nearby a good ruined castle, but it was too late in the day and shut. Soon the discrepancies between map and terrain forced us back onto the main road; PFR slept and woke to find ELR had plunged into the heart of La Roche sur-Lyon, but U-turn and successful extraction. Back to Mouilleron for eight.

Friday 15th September. Il pleut comme les chats et les chiens

Unremitting steady rain. In the afternoon PFR sallied forth to Bazoges en Pareds, the next village to the west of Mouilleron, and distinguished by its Donjon or ‘Keep’, an imposing tower of 1380, part of a larger fortified manor or castle. It (and the adjoining ‘medieval garden’, which contains a good dovecote of 1524) are open to the public; in the custodian’s office was a splendid ammonite – it turned out that the tower had recently hosted an ammonite display, and they were common locally, around the village of Jaudonniere (4 m to the west), both around the hamlet of Pareds to the north and on the road to Ste Hermine on the south – a note for next time.

Back to the tower. One enters from the courtyard through a miniature forebuilding, which also contains a straight stair to the next floor. At courtyard level are one large and one smaller room; a newel stair goes down to another room beneath, and up to a similar pair of rooms, but taller and vaulted (the only vaults in the tower), on the floor above. Going on up the stair there is a single small room, and then another pair of grander rooms (the larger with a good carved fireplace); is there then a missing room on the floor beneath?, After another pair of rooms on the fifth floor there is a door out onto a walkway behind the machicolations, covered by a restored pent roof.

It is difficult to make immediate sense of the other remains, although there is clearly extensive medieval work in the house immediately to the south; there seems to be a ditch beyond this, so the re-created medieval garden and its dovecote stood outside the enceinte.. The church just east of the tower was apparently inside the fortified perimeter as well; it has a Romanesque nave and tower; the thick-walled chancel and its north chapel are 15th century additions, with a new nave and chancel to the south being added in the 19th century, but clearly reusing an older west door.

Saturday 16th September: Plusieurs de species des animaux petites et furrieux, assemble dans un cave et grouvant avec un Gaul

Awoke and it was still raining! Tidied up, took recyclables to the recycling point, ELR showed Megan’s wedding photos to la vielle dame from across the road, and farewell to Mouilleron.

First stop at Argenton Chateau, about an hour and a half to the north-east; desperately sought coffee, sans success, but it had a fine church, built in granite but for an amazing Romanesque portal with its head in white limestone; masses of figure sculpture in the arch, virtues fighting vices, labours of the months, all the usual favourites, with helpful incised inscriptions, Christ in judgement at the centre, a whole world view in stone; many of the figures had lost their heads, maybe to iconoclasts, but it was still wonderful. Inside the church it was gloomy as a cave, but then again it was almost as dark outside, although the rain had eased. We did not have time for the nearby chateau (a backward glimpse from the car showed an apsidal Romanesque chapel) but headed on north.

Headed into Doue la Fontainne, and on trying to find our way out saw a ruin and stopped; a notice alongside described this as 'La Motte Carolingienne'. This looked to be the lower part of a big square tower (up to around 6 m high), with lots of herringbone work, and an arched doorway with massive drawbar tunnels; there was a lower cross wall inside with the remains of a fireplace. The notice board dated the whole thing to c800, and confusingly said that there were only two Carolingian fireplaces in Europe, and that the other one was in Scotland....

A few km north-west is Rochemenier; we followed the signs to the 'troglodyte village'. On the surface it looks a fairly ordinary village, except that the houses are set well apart, with small stone-walled fields between; then you realise that the tops of trees, and chimney pots, are appearing over the low field walls. The walls in fact bound what are in effect quarries, with cavernous openings – some fronted by stone walls with doorways and windows – on all sides. We had a coffee in a subterranean restaurant, then visited the museum, which comprised three holes in the ground that contained two farms, plus a village hall, and even a chapel (underneath the 13th-century one on the surface) all hollowed out of the soft marl. It was all very well displayed, including an exhibition on troglodyte dwellings elsewhere in the world, and even a Tintin cartoon demonstrating the use of 'troglodyte' as a term of abuse (by Captain Haddock).

Then back east, round Doue la Fontaine again, and saw signs to Abbaye Absie. We knew nothing about this one, and, as often in France, it proved a sheer delight. A Tironesian house, now all mixed up with a farmyard and a restaurant. The 12th and 13th century church had lost its nave, but kept its central tower, straight-ended eastern arm with a triplet of tall lancets, and elaborate later Gothic south-eastern chapel. It was open, perhaps because this was a special heritage weekend. There were wonders within – a lofty vault on slender columns, original tiled flooring, an incised effigy of a bishop (picked out in red paint) – and without remains of unrestored monastic buildings all mixed up with the farm. The west range (and a range with a gatehouse extending west from its north end) seemed to be there, along with part of the east side of the east range and the east range of a second court or cloister to its east.

And so to Fontevraud, principal destination of the day, a major royal abbey, head of an order uniquely presided over by an abbess. It is really more than one abbey – the main monastery, the nun's house – is immense, but dotted around it were smaller associated ones, for married women and penitent prostitutes (!), for lepers, for monks etc. The main building has a huge Romanesque church, albeit heavily restored; the

nave, aisleless, is roofed by a series of transverse arches with domes between. On the south is an immense cloister, now Classical except for its late Gothic south walk. The vast refectory is late Gothic as well, except at its west end is the celebrated Romanesque kitchen with its forest of restored chimney stacks, its interior a ring of apses of such ecclesiastical appearance that it was at one stage seen as a church building. To the south east the infirmary ranges are largely post medieval, but intriguing signs pointing to the 'Reseau Souterraine' led to a stair down to a section of a huge vaulted drain. The whole place has an overlay of a series of superimposed characters – the 12th century Romanesque (largely the church, but showing through every so often in the monastic buildings), later medieval Gothic, early Renaissance (chapter house), the 18th century and then, largely removed now, the post-Revolution conversion to an immense prison. The last prisoners only left in 1985. At one stage there had been five floors inserted into the church nave; the roof domes had been removed at this time, but have now been restored.

South-east of the main complex is St Lazaire, the leper's monastery, now a posh hotel, full of a detachment of elderly English who had come with their veteran cars; we took tea with them in the south range, and they were not impressed with what the French do with tea; the staff were looking more harassed than is usual here. South range and cloister are Classical, but the church is Gothic, all new stone outside but more authentic within, despite now being a restaurant.

Back through the outer court with its post-medieval buildings, the Sortie as often being funnelled through the gift shop. Resisted temptation; the best books were in French anyway. Outside in the little town, the church of S. Michel has a Romanesque chancel arch, and an 18th-century timbered gallery round the nave; a couple of coped grave slabs lay outside the west front; a little further west the chapel of S Catherine, with a tall chimney-like structure at the apex of its roof, a lanterne de mort! PFR had read about these, but this was the first chance to meet one in the stone.

After a little fitful sun in the afternoon, the sky had darkened again, and thunder was grumbling in the distance; it was not far to our chamber d'hote, a 15th-century house La Balastiere a km or so west of Beaumont-en-Verons, on the triangle of low-lying land at the confluence of the two great rivers Loire and Vienne; a lovely place, with an amazing vernacular roof structure above our room. In the evening sallied forth to eat at a pizzeria, but which produced an excellent French meal (galettes avec all sorts of savoury things).

Returned, drowsy and PFR vinful. Awoke in the early hours, to the sound of many raised voices, bursts of song, children squealing – but we were in the back of beyond, at a lonely old house where the only other guests all seemed to be middle-aged English couples. What on earth was happening on? In actual fact, the happening was not on, but under the earth. The revelry was plainly in French; PFR stumbled to the bathroom window and peered out; the noise clearly emanated from below, where there were lit doors and windows, but we were only on the first floor, and they seemed far below. Bemused; eventually the clamour faded, and sleep came again. Then did morning; was it all a dream? To the bathroom window, looked down – into a great pit. Down there, beneath an overhanging rim of rock, were the doors and windows, now closed and shuttered. Troglodytes! This is a surreal place

Sunday 17th September: Gladiators and Mushroom Mines

It was Sunday, so we went to church at Beaumont-en-Veron, a nice stone-vaulted 19th-century essay in the usual Romanesque-just-going-pointed; Mass very like an Anglican communion (but in French of course) with a fairly evangelical sermon (which ELR could understand); bells and a few clouds of smoke but quite simple, felt friendly.

First sightseeing port-of-call was Candes–St-Martin, on the south bank where the two rivers join, with a remarkable 12th-century collegiate church; followed a footpath above it to a viewpoint, up between rock walls and more troglodyte dwellings, still inhabited; alleys and even small roads kept diving under rock arches. Back to the church, which has a superb north porch, and turrets and machicolations added in the troubled 15th century. St6 Martin died here in

Then, after a coffee, over to the north bank and downstream along the levee, with fine river views, past Samur on the other bank, to cross at Gennes, where there seemed a variety of antiquarian attractions. Followed the signposts to the Gallo-Roman arena, where we got caught up in open day; instead of a quick look round, found ourselves put in a group, being led from around enthusiastic locals (all in Roman dress) giving discourses on topics such as mosaic making and Roman surveying, whilst amateur gladiators clattered and rolled around in the arena itself. Fun, but it felt we could be there all day, and when we did escape forgot to look for a nearby dolmen, but headed back upriver on the south bank, first to Cunault, with another superb Romanesque church, 12th-century but incorporating an 11th-century tower in its north aisle. More wonderful carved capitals, and remains of wall painting all over – also a 13th century painted and gilded reliquary carved from a solid block of walnut.

Then it was time for the mushroom mine, although PFR had to be tied to the mast and grit his teeth to pass more amazing Romanesque churches, plus the odd chateau, before we got to St-Hilaire-St-Florent and the mushroom museum, in disused underground tufa quarries. All along this side of the Loire is a steep escarpment with cliffs of white tufa, and each one is positively riddled with man-made holes where the locals' troglodytic desires have got the better of them. It is said there are around 800 km (that is 500 miles!) of underground galleries in this area. The mushroom museum allows one to wander around quite a ramifying maze of these, usually c 2 m high and 6 m wide. Everything you ever wanted to know about fungi is displayed on the walls; stuffed fungi, dried fungi, plastic fungi, helpful notes about fungi. One death cap can wipe out a family, although it may be up to 24 hours before they realise this. There are also droves of fungi themselves, bursting out of black plastic gro-bags, or mushrooming forth from mounds of compost. They look bizarre and alien objects, which explains why the French like to eat them; there also a small display of fossils (mostly big but rather anonymous ammonites) which rather surprisingly the French do not seem to eat; it is probably the risk to the teeth that puts them off-limits to all but the most rabid gastronomes.

Surfaced, and tea time approached, so into Saumur; parked by the impressive chateau, high above the river, but it closed for the usual travaux anyway, so descended a winding route into the old town where we had a look at St Peters, yet another big

Romanesque church (with notable 16th century tapestries of the life of S Peter; why is there something about tapestries that fails to excite?) with a Classical veneer to its west end. Then PFR had a walk out onto the bridge, with lovely evening light on the town and river, whilst ELR, footwear, waited. Indian meal, only a qualified success; Indians and English, trying to converse in French, proved a linguistic bridge too far. Then uphill to the car again and back to the chamber d'hote.

A quiet night, the odd owl; not even an echo of troglodytic carousal. Looked out of the window and far away, across the level fields, a great glowing cloud of steam rolled silently up from the cooling towers of the nuclear power station 10 km or so to the north.

Monday 18th September: A Day of Palpitations, engendered by Antiquarian Excess

Travelling through France really needs a health warning; a bit like that white-knuckle comedy ride at the Futuroscope: too much too wonderful happens too fast. Today was a case in point; it combined the emotional – buildings just so fascinating or so achingly picturesque so as to raise the blood pressure and trigger an intercranial maelstrom (largely of pure joy) combined with physical exertion. So much to see that one had simply to hit the ground running to see it, and two major castles with huge towers that were both the right way up and upside down! This may need explanation. Both Chinon and Loches are built on ridges, and both have towers which one can enter at courtyard level and then descend for floor after floor to the outside ground level (or below it).

Anyway, the day started with a short hop to Chinon, on the north bank of the river, the old town at the foot of a towering wall of cliff and the Chateau string out at the top. It actually turns out to be strung out along a narrow ridge, cut into sections by big ditches to create in effect three wards. For a British comparison (and quite a close one, topographically and in feel, think Chepstow). The easternmost is undergoing travaux, and covered by scaffolding and plastic sheets. The central ward is by far the largest, and there are ongoing travaux here as well, at the north-east corner. At the south-east corner one enters through the lofty Tour de la Clocher – lots of stairs and exhibitions about Joan of Arc, of whom more later. The major apartments run along the south side of the ward, and are partly roofed; big rooms with grand fireplaces and the inevitable tapestries. The west end ward, the Fort du Coudray, has a couple of interesting towers; the Mill Tower at the westernmost point of the castle is the oldest extant one, circular and simple Romanesque, whilst the so-called keep on the east side has had Joan of Arc's bedroom on the upper floor converted into a pigeon cote, but goes on down into the bedrock, where the builders turned troglodye and a warren of passages lead off, the most alluring sealed by a metal grille. ELR only explored the chateau at ground level: PFR did the towers, panting and puffing

More holes in the rock when we eventually found the Chapel of St Radegund, about a km east of the Chateau, on a narrow lane that clings to the cliff face. Sadly, like all the other ancient ecclesiastical buildings in the town, this is still being restored, and only accessible to the public on special occasions, so we could not see its unique 12th-century wall paintings. All one can see is the west end of a Romanesque chapel, with quite a nice doorway, sticking out from the rockface, with rows of secular

subterranean dwellings (some still occupied) on either side. Descended into the cliff-foot town, and found St Maxme, a disused church with a twin-towered west front overlooking a little square, and a roofed nave that has lost its aisles. It is being renovated, and modern seating constructed in the open-sided nave. This is said to be the oldest building in Chinon, and one can believe it – the west front has a scatter of carved panels of Merovingian feel, and the lower part of the north-west tower baluster shafts at its windows, whilst the rudimentary round arches and square piers of the nave arcades look early as well. There are clear echoes of the famous Anglo-Saxon churches in England, evens ones as diverse as Brixworth and Monkwearmouth. A little to the south-east is the later medieval St Etienne, but only the exterior was visitable. Lots of good timber-framed houses in the streets around here; ogled at their carpentry details (and found an exposed roof like that in our late chambre d'hote); then omelette-and-lettuce lunch in a bar near the bridge.

East along the north bank of the river, and the first unplanned deviations, to Cravantles-Coteaux, after seeing assign 'Eglise, IX to XII siecles'. IX! that's old. It was, with some wonderful patterned fabric in its nave walls, and Merovingian interlace-carved pillars within. This church is now an automated ancient monument; to enter one puts a note in a machine, which gives change and a token., which you then put in another slot, and it permits the entry of one (or maybe two slim intertwined people?) via a turnstile; inside music starts playing and there is some quite good interpretative material, plus a machine to see one postcards or even CDs of the music. Exit is by another turnstile. PFR thought there was more of the IX phase than the phased plan showed. The east end has an XII apse; just over the road is an attractive watering-place with roofed walkways around a square pool.

Then good driving east to Loches, with its walled 'cite royal' up on a rock. ELR stayed in car, PFR ran around; it really needs a day (or two). The church of St Ouds is Romanesque and quite bizarre, bar a west porch and eastern apse it consists of a four-bay main body, all articulated by tall transverse arches. The end bays rise as square towers capped by octagonal stone spires, whilst the two between simply have similar spires (completely open beneath; one can peer up them) rising straight from eaves level. Five minutes to the south-east is a fortress referred to as the 'Donjon' (incorrectly 'Dungeon' in the English guide), to distinguish it from a later medieval one, the 'Logis' at the opposite end of the walled town. Complex, compact and lofty, the high spot of this – very literally – is a massive tower keep that goes up six or seven storeys. Now a hollow shell, the visitor alternates between modern metal galleries, and straight or newel stairs within the walls, to ascend to the summit. Nearby is a later round tower, the 'Mantlet', nowhere near as tall going up, but with a newel stair going down and down, past a whole series of vaulted prison chambers. As dungeons go they are pretty comfortable (with fireplaces and garderobes), for the wealthy only. One notable resident was interned along with his fool; it is not recorded whether he wanted this, or whether it might really have been a peculiarly-terrible form of torture; just think, being beaten over the head with a pig's bladder by some idiot in striped clothes with bells jingling on his hat and shoes, and told medieval jokes, all day long, for years and years..... At the bottom, it was off into rock-cut galleries, and, rather surprisingly for a prison tower, exits, both to the outside world at the foot of the rock (today gated) or up a long flight of stairs (pant, pant) to the interior of the castle again.

East through the narrow streets of Beaulieu-les-Loches (which look invitingly medieval) to the Chartreuse du Liget, which we had not had time to visit when we passed a few days ago. Despite the bright sunshine, this a bit of an eerie place. It is now a private house, which just about tolerates visitors to its ruined Carthusian bits. You leave your car by the road, and enter an 18th-century gateway with a carved of St Bruno, sprawled in a melodramatic manner, clutching his crucifix, whilst a skull grins up at him; I suppose you have to know the story.... Beyond the drive drops through two more gateways to an 18th-century house, all in perfect symmetry; but as you descend into the grounds of the house, at its left end and set completely skew to everything else in this ordered ensemble, is the shell of the aisleless and quite small 12th-century church, with at its east end just the springing of a lost apse. There has clearly been a courtyard or cloister on the north, and adjoining ranges to north-east and south-west. A little to the north-east, and again on a different alignment, is the great cloister, an elongate rectangle in plan, and really quite vast. Apart from an 18th-century brick-vaulted walk on the side nearest the later house, nothing remains other than the back wall, with a series of little square hatches through which the monks in their individual cells were fed their meals, and through which vines now grow. Everything else has gone. The house and other 18th-century buildings are all shuttered, but there are a few parked cars; people appear and disappear, at a distance, without speaking. There is a basket on a windowsill, with leaflets and postcards, and a notice asking one to leave some minimal fee to visit, although this has now been crossed out. Are there still quasi-Carthusians in residence, trying to keep to their vows of seeing as few people and saying as few words as possible?.

Then down the hill to Corroiroire, already visited, but so delightful we (ie PFR) just had to come back and do a sketch. We were already running late, so had to ring our next chambre d'hote near Tours to make excuses; pas de probleme. Back to Loches, then a good fast road north-west towards Tours. Almost got there, but in the village of Cormery there was a brown sign, 'Abbaye, IX to XIII siecle', pointing into a maze of narrow streets, with a ragged ruined tower looming above the roofs. This visit was totally unplanned, and in some ways the most wonderful site of all, a totally unrestored abbey ruin all tangled up with houses and yards, the sort that one only sees in 18th century engravings and in fevered antiquarian dreams (does someone else out there have fevered antiquarian dreams? Please say you do). You actually drive in through the west door of the church, under the tower; beyond are bits of transepts, and a now-detached Gothic chapel that clearly sprouted from the original apse. The cloister was on the north, and quite a lot of its arcades survive, along with the chapter house front. The west range seems the best-preserved bit; through big Gothic windows one can glimpse a lofty vault. A helpful plan on the tower wall suggests that this is in fact the refectory, which would be a really unusual departure from what I like to term the conventional conventual layout. I want to know more about it, I want to draw it, I want to live here.... ELR even allowed herself to be prised out of the car to have a brief look around.

And so, after a few km on motorway (and causing brief chaos by reversing out of a payage that wanted money from us, when we thought it just wanted to give us a card; why aren't these things all the same?), to our chambre d'hote at Rochecourbon 5 km east of Tours, up a steep and horribly narrow lane that scaled the Loire river cliff, which as usual is riddled with troglodytic burrowings; there is even a posh troglhotel. There was a car parked in just the wrong place (it probably belonged to a

troglodyte); his wing mirror was already well scraped, anyway. *Chambre d'hôte fine* (very frenchified, *poodle noir* etc), and we found a much easier way back down into the valley to go to Vouvray for the nearest restaurant, which was fine as well. Porky bits and then fishy stuff.

Joan of Arc: a problem.

Joan is of course the great French national heroine, and this area was her stamping ground. In Chinon she is everywhere, here eyes always cast beseechingly heavenward. In one shop window there was a two-thirds scale antique Joan, in full armour, clutching a banner labelled 'Jesus Maria'. How does a latter day English visitor react?; it feels churlish to be critical, especially since we were the baddies who burned the poor soul. But Joan is not a good heroine for our troubled times; we don't want heroines who hear voices from God, then gallop around on horses driving spears through people (as she does on one sculpture in the Chateau). As a youngster, I was always puzzled by her, particularly through her apparent allegiance with a large and ferocious fish². The basic story seems to be that there was a dispute between two branches of a French family about who was the real legal heir who should rule France; one branch happened at the time to rule England as well (but they got buried here, at Fontevraud³) An explanation on the wall at Chinon says the English branch thought the Dauphin was a bastard⁴; Joan, backed by her voices thought otherwise. People rallied to her side, getting an extra thrill from the daring transgender style of a girl wearing armour; it must have been OK, however, as she was a saint. She won some victories, then someone handed her over to the Brits, who uncharitably burned her as a witch. However, if you are faced by someone declaring God told them to slaughter you⁵, you are forced into a bit of a yes/no situation; you either slaughter yourselves or are morally obliged to prove to them that they are misguided, burning being perhaps an over-emphatic form of the latter. Bit of a sad story really; countries need national saints to prove their delusion that God is on their side, which is why it is helpful that the English share St George with the Italians....

Tuesday 19th September: The Magical Mystery of Tours (and how we didn't quite find it).

Tours is a city on the south bank of the Loire, and another place with an omnipresent saint, Martin. Martin was a Roman soldier, who, one day in the 370s, cut his cloak in half and gave half to a beggar; not the hardest way to achieve sainthood (even if his mates did laugh at him) but he did go on to be a generally good guy, and a bit of a healthier role model than Joan. She is still around here as well, calling in on a Tours armourer to be fitted out before departing, clanking, to the Battle of Orleans.

We parked on the north bank of the river in an ancient suburb, beside the church of St Symphorien, which was open, with a friendly old lady verger; it has an elaborate

² The Dauphin. I didn't know (and am still not all that sure) what a dauphin is, but in Darlington, where I grew up, there was once a pub called the Dolphin (which sounded similar) and the painting on its signboard rather scared me.

³ And built the Chateau at Chinon, there thus being an argument that it should be returned to England, if a suitable site could be found.

⁴ This seems rather churlish as well; he may well have been quite a nice fish.

⁵ Thus proving he had changed His mind from the 'love your enemies' bit, about which I remain to be convinced

Renaissance west door of the 1530s, a Romanesque apse, and an extraordinary tapering plan dictated by local street lines. Then we crossed the Loire on a footbridge, to the Chateau – a single 18th-century wing with a medieval round tower at each end, alongside a mixture of Roman and medieval foundations. It was shut. Nearby was the Cathedral (St Gatien), which wasn't, and is really very fine. We met St Martin (many times) in frescoes and 13th-century stained glass windows and paid 3E each to have a look at the cloister and scriptorium, which were interesting. There are odd Romanesque bits, oddly at the extremities of the building; the eastern parts are 13th century, the nave 14th century and the west end 15th and 16th century, over-the-top spiky Gothic just going Renaissance at the tops of the two towers.

A word of explanation at this point on the form of Tours. The Cathedral and Chateau are at the east end of the city centre, within the walled Gallo-Roman town; the Roman west wall, with its distinctive courses of tiles, can be seen both in the exposed foundations beside the Chateau, and then actually embedded in the lower part of the west end of the Cathedral. There was another early settlement a few hundred metres to the west. This grew up around the place that Martin was buried, and eventually received its own town wall as well; at different times it was called both Martinopolis and Chateau Neuf. This is a classic development pattern for a city – there is both the Roman centre, and then a new Christian one grows up around the place some saint or martyr is buried, which by Roman law had to be well outside the city limits. Think St Albans and Verulam – although there the original Roman centre has been abandoned.

It was only in the Middle Ages that the Roman centre and the later one around Martin's mausoleum were encircled by a single wall. We headed west towards Martinopolis, through the modernised middle of the city (badly damaged in World War II) to what is now called 'the old town', site of Martin's huge Romanesque church. By the 12th century this was one of the largest churches in Christendom, but it got wrecked by the Huguenots (who made quite a profession of church wrecking hereabouts, although they usually got slaughtered afterwards) and its remains largely pulled down around 1790. Fortunately antiquaries made plans and drawings of the ruin first, which show just how spectacular it was. Odd bits remain, mainly two spectacular towers, one of which stood at the end of the north transept, and the other the southern of a pair at the west front. There is also part of a cloister, but it was shut, and a chapel now housing a museum of sculpture retrieved from the ruins, but it was shut as well. Had lunch (lamb and a big pile of yellow beans) in a café nearby. Then we had a look at the present Basilica of St Martin, a huge Classical-style building set north-south so that it could get its east end over the site of Martin's tomb in the older church; the builder reckoned he had found the saint's remains, and built an over-the-top crypt (sweeping away the remains of the Romanesque one) to house them, all shiny marble and stones with pious inscriptions, like the rest of the building heavily and excessively Catholic. Didn't like it. Wandered the old town streets, with a lot of attractive timber framing, to the one museum we did find open, an archaeological one, in a pleasant Renaissance house. Then on to St Saturnin, the church of a Carmelite friary (shut), the Priory Church of St Julien (shut) with a wine museum (shut) in its west range. This was another important site, founded in the 9th century midway between the two older centres; it has a fine early Romanesque porch-tower (cf S Beniot) with a taller Gothic church now tacked on, with an odd straight east end rather than the usual apse, and a north cloister. There was another museum in the north and east ranges, which amazingly was open!; PFR raced to fetch ELR from a riverside

bench where she was resting her foot and reading the newspaper, but as we entered a man emerged and simply said ‘ferme’ (shut) as he closed the door in our faces, although it was two hours before its official closing time. No explanation, no apology; he was going home early and, like the rest of Tours, just could not be bothered to accommodate a pair of middle-aged English visitors. Pourquoi, pourquoi, pourquoi? ELR then trod in a pile of dog dirt; considering the state of the streets here, it was a surprise that it took her so long⁶. So we gave up and trekked back across the Loire on the road bridge and eastward again along the north bank, back to our parking place at S Saturnin..

On the way back to Rochecorbon called in at the site of the Abbey of Marmoutier: St Martin lived in a cave here in his days as a troglo-hermit, but a major abbey was built just under the cliff later on. Our 8E guide book to the town sings the praises of its remains. There is a big school here now (with a fine model of the medieval monastery in the entrance hall); we were allowed to wander in the grounds, but the actual abbey site, of course, was shut, and fenced off. We could at least see it from a distance. There is an 11th-century tower, which apparently stood a little to the north-west of the later church, right against the cliff, with entrances to various subterranean chapels etc alongside. The church itself is represented by footings, excavated a few years ago but all a bit grassed over and untidy; a medieval block (the prior’s house?) stands a little to the west. Much of the precinct wall survives, enclosing the school, which is entered by a fine medieval gatehouse, and there are a few conical-roofed mural towers as well.

And a meal to forget

Our last night in France; the good restaurant we had patronised last night was shut, but we found one back in Rochecorbon. It was called the ‘Oubliette’, and set in a troglodytic excavation at the foot of the valley side. In English an ‘oubliette’ is a technical term for the sort of pit dungeon in a castle that prisoners were thrown into and left to rot, so we should have been warned.

Some French food is very good, and some is very reasonably priced, and until now we had been fortunate with our choices. However, there are some French eating places that elevate gastronomy into a religious exercise of a particularly unhealthy type, where food is given names that even ELR has to ask the meaning of, and served with a surreal reverence. What started, one hopes, as perfectly respectable and conventional foodstuffs⁷ are treated in ways that render them totally unrecognisable, in some perverse search for a ‘new’ flavour, texture or artistic appearance. The result is a meal that is largely a succession of small items that make you first wonder what they are, and then wonder what they taste of, and finally wonder if you should have eaten them at all. There is something indecent and unnatural about treating food like this; some inner voice cries ‘no!’. I am sure that if one searched the Book of Leviticus one would find Scriptural prohibitions against whatever they have done to food to make it into this.

⁶ An appropriate modification to the city name could be the insertion of a letter ‘d’.

⁷ Although there is always the possibility here that one is eating either some dread form of gastropod, crustacean, amphibian or reptile, or bodily parts of some more conventional farm animal that has been treated in some nightmarish and probably illegal manner.

After a succession of such oddities, just about edible if one did not think too much about them, PFR's main course (allegedly fish) was small cubes of a white rubber-like substance, flavourless and inedible⁸. Chewing had no affect; if one swallowed at least they disappeared, but what happened to them then? A worrying thought; to continue just did not feel wise.

Not all was lost. The bread was pretty decent, and the tap water really quite good. Just don't look at the bill.

Wednesday 20th September: Vendome and the Last Lap

Our last day dawned misty; PFR stomach still unhappy after the dubious repast of the night before. Goodbye to host (and poodle) and navigation northward. The one last port of call, an hour into the long journey, was Vendome, an old town in the valley of the little River Loir (without the 'e' of its much larger cousin); a picturesque place with many bridges and gardens, a ruined chateau on the hill above and a major abbey in the town centre; the spiky silhouette of its big Gothic church rises above the roof tops, with a tall Romanesque campanile (and spire) just outside its west end. A local landowner and his wife had a vision of three flaming spears falling to earth, and the result was monks from Martmoutier being brought in to found a Benedictine monastery dedicated to the Holy Trinity. Surprisingly their first little mid-11th century church still survives, standing just clear of the south side of the 13th-century chevet. The present church is an amalgam of a number of periods and styles, from its Romanesque transepts and crossing piers to a the 16th-century Flamboyant Gothic of its west front, rising to a beautiful gable window with 'flame' tracery. Inside there are any number of treasures; the splendid carved misericords of the choir stalls are especially memorable, with grotesques, the labours of the months and a green man. The easternmost chapel of the chevet has a statuesque Virgin Mary in mid-12th century stained glass.

Despite the usual 18th-century remodelling there are substantial remains of the medieval cloister ranges; the chapter house is 15th century, but the removal of part of its south wall has revealed a 12th-century one behind it, with splendid paintings; the Miraculous Draught of Fishes remains complete and the apostles' faces are the work of an artist, not simply an artisan. There is a museum in the adjacent buildings, but little medieval to see inside (although a good display of fossils on the top floor). The south range retains a series of blocked oculi (cf Norwich) just above the roof-line of the destroyed cloister walk. Old drawings show a spiky Romanesque kitchen, like Fontevraud, at the west end of the south range, but it has gone. A long range of buildings bounding the outer court to the west survive, apparently granaries, preserving a series of ornate Romanesque two-light windows. There is now just a gap through to the market square beyond, where there was presumably once a gateway. The Square has the west tower of a demolished church, and a fine timber-framed house on the south. A two hour stop does not do Vendome justice.

⁸ In French, rubber is 'Caoutchouc' which really sums up how one feels with this stuff in one's mouth.

Then north, on roads of increasing busyness, towards Paris. One traffic jam at Chateau Renault looked serious, but the shuffling queue of lorries was escaped by threading through the town centre. Eventually came the dreaded peripherique around the capital; lots of lanes and lots of French drivers (including manic bikers) going very fast, and road signs that were forever indicating different lanes for the airport. The frantic whirl soon spat us out into the airport, but realised we had not filled up the hire car's tank as we had agreed, so escaped again into one last bit of rural France to find a supermarket and cheap diesel; then the transnational anonymity of the airport.