

A Fortnight in France, June 2007

Wednesday 6 June 2007. Getting there

Getting to Bordeaux takes a while; in fact it took six separate journeys. The first by car to Newcastle airport at an ungodly early hour (5.30), the second by unnatural aerial means (but at least things stayed on), the third by taxi across London (glimpsing interesting things from the windows), the fourth by increasingly speedy train from Waterloo¹ to Victoria, the fifth by hot and sticky metro across Paris and the sixth by TGV down the flat western side of France. Even after that there had to be a taxi to our hotel, then a late-night excursion to find an eating place, showing Bordeaux to be a grid of gracious 18th-century streets, all quite clean and tidy and with well-behaved citizens, although their image slipped a bit at 2am when some idiot was revving his scooter engine to destruction under our hotel window.

Thursday 7th June. Bordeaux

The city confirmed its promise of the night before. It is almost all 18th century, although the scattered monuments that punctuate the skylines are mostly medieval. A pair of thin spires locate St Andrew's Cathedral, standing in a spacious square with the former Bishop's Palace, now the Hotel de Ville, to the north-west. The Cathedral has a broad but aisleless nave with some rather battered 11th century work in the west end, transepts with their end gables flanked by towers (the northern one having the spires) than a typical French chevet with radiating chapels. The exterior is a bit of a jumble – especially the assortment of flying buttresses propping up the nave – but the interior is an impressive space, but notable for the complete absence of interpretative material. Heritage needs are supplied by a shop at the base of the detached Pey-Berland Tower a little to the east of the Cathedral, which PFR paid his 5E and pantingly and pausingly ascended two-hundred-and-odd steps, to just below the huge gold Virgin-and-Child that tops its spire. Great views over the city – a mile or so the south-east the Basilica of St Michael has an even taller detached tower and spire.

We then trekked north looking for a wine museum that no longer existed, but found a tourist office where we booked up vineyard visits for the morrow; nearby was a park with a huge Monument au Girondins of c1900 with remarkably jolly sculpture, including fountains with lots of horses-cum-sea monsters and various mythical characters in bronze, spouting in all directions and giving the appearance of thoroughly enjoying themselves.

More route-finding to the north-west to find the Pallais Gallien which is actually the remains of a Roman Amphitheatre, a dramatic and under-rated ruin²; the northern gate tower is more or less complete, and a little less than one quarter of the outer wall with superimposed arcades of tall round-headed arches. The rest has gone, but an aerial photograph shows that parts of the outline survive in curving property boundaries etc.

Then to the Church of St Seurin, jumbled without and gloomy within, but with a fine Romanesque west tower and porch, and a splendid early crypt – only officially open

¹ Where we had a delay at the check in as the X-ray of the case identified Elaine's collapsible walking stick as a sword.

² 'A few rows and arcades overgrown with weeds' says the Green Guide

on Saturdays but a friendly verger took us round. The crypt is in the form of an aisled nave and chancel flanked by parallel chapels, and is packed with what are here termed 'palaeochristian' monuments including three superb limestone sarcophagi with foliate designs and chi-rho monograms. The 13th-century south portal has figures of the disciples, including one with a serpent wrapped around his head (and ? clutching a money bag) which we took to be Judas. Just south of the church is an underground museum with dozens of other early burials, and the lower walls of a 4th century church, including frescoes of a duck (!) and a horse-cum-sea serpent just like those on the 1870s monument. The monuments were all very simple – some coped slabs, only one with a cross, children's remains in amphorae, and one tile-built coffin.

Then an unpleasant hour dragging cases and bags from the hotel and trying to find a bus to the station, and then finding we had booked a car for the previous day... however all was well in the end, took delivery of a nearly new Peugeot 207 diesel – a bit cramped – and found our way out of town eastward to St Saveur and Abbaye de La Sauve-Majeure, the dramatic hilltop ruin of a Benedictine house. Much of the church stands, with a soaring octagonal belfry rising from the south aisle, and a fine set of Romanesque apses; superb capitals are its chief treasure. Thunder was rumbling and rain starting so inspection was hurried. The cloister buildings include the lower parts of the chapter house, with a tiled floor, and the south wall of the refectory. The west range was a post medieval rebuild, and had become a teacher training college until destroyed by fire in 1910; a southern extension houses a museum with some more splendid sculptural pieces and a set of 1840s antiquarian pencil drawings.

Then to Saint-Emilion and 3 km west to our bed-and-breakfast, a vineyard with its drive flanked by red roses, all very pretty. The evenings' food-quest first took us to Montagne but the recommended restaurant there looked too pricey – managed a glance at the outside of the cruciform 12th-century church there ³ - so we returned to St-Emilion, packed with architectural treasures set aside for the morrow, to end up eating in a square alongside the rock-cut church and wandered streets lined with wonderful buildings.

Friday 8th June. St Emilion, above and below ground

From the broad hectares of vineyards to the north, St Emilion presents a strange skyline, the Collegiate Church looking like a cross between a stranded ship and a great barn, and alongside it the towering campanile which in fact belongs to a subterranean rock-cut church. A great rock-cut ditch encircles the place as well, lined by gated entrances to caves (rock-cut wine cellars) and inside this has been a wall, much of which remains although its gates are now mostly just gaps. Once inside the walls, the town suddenly spills away down a steep amphitheatre; narrow roughly-paved lanes drop steeply to a square alongside a stepped rock wall that turns out to be the surface manifestation of an extraordinary underground church. We joined the official 10.00 am tour of the town's subterranean. First, at the foot of the square, came St Emilion's hermitage; the saint fled here in the 7th century following a controversial miracle in which he turned a man into a block of wood; the rock-cut chamber is equipped with baptistery, bed and prayer niche, as well as an altar now bearing a highly inauthentic statue of the saint. Directly above is the Chapel of the Holy Trinity, apsidal chancel of a once-larger building, right on the cusp of Romanesque and

³ Is the nave a 19th century rebuild? Two medieval-looking cross slabs stood outside the east end

Gothic – its windows as little lancets – with some very fine wall paintings, and a couple of coped medieval grave slabs. Alongside is an entrance into the catacombs, an irregular series of medieval rock-cut galleries with arched burial niches at the sides which had burials in their bases, with a chimney-like opening in the roof, the Resurrection Cupola, around which a rock-cut spiral stair originally descended. One branch opens into the rock-cut church, a much larger cavern with aisles, the huge square piers – all solid rock- now massively corseted with modern steel. Not only was the weight of the towering campanile above bearing down on them, but water was rising up and dissolving them from the inside, prompting pretty desperate measures. Beyond a few scattered carvings there is little architectural detail.

‘Saint-Emilion; quand les pierres parlent...’ is the title of a popular book on sale here, full of stunning colour photographs of the varied antiquities and also of stunning new age ramblings and suppositions as to their assumed significance. The French are at least as good, or as bad, at this sort of thing as the English; one does not need any more than a smattering of the language to realise the general drift of the text. Menhirs, the Holy Grail, Chivalry, Tristan and Iseult, Richard the Lionheart, secrets of local viticulture, they are all here; only the poor Cathars are missing. Much is made of two carvings high on the west wall of the nave of the underground church. On the left is a man with a spear facing a monster of some sort, on the right a man playing something like a violin. Both are carved in adjacent oval sunk panels; the vaguely-chalice-shaped space between them is seen as representing the Holy Grail⁴. The carvings are simplistic and crude, nothing like the pair of four-winged angels on the ceiling overhead. They must mean something, but the book’s interpretation of Chivalric Codes seems mumbo jumbo; in fact they have the air of being some late rustic addition.

Abandoning such musings and to the surface again, nevertheless in a state of antiquarian shock and awe. The surface is pretty good as well. A doorway from the Tourist Information Centre opens straight into a wonderful cloister, attached to the Collegiate Church, which was at one time an Augustinian monastery. The east walk has Romanesque detail in the chapter house entrance, the south Gothic burial niches, and there are a few medieval graveslabs, more coped ones like those in the Chapel of the Holy Trinity, and a conventional four-circle cross slab as well. The attached church is still in use; its aisles nave, Romanesque with later tracery inserted in its round-arched windows, has a vaulted roof including two circular domed bays, with the usual proliferation of chapels and apses at the east end. The massive but squat west tower, a bellcot on the south of the crossing and the tall steeply-pitched roof of the easternmost apse all contribute to the bizarre skyline.

There were other monasteries here as well. As one enters the town, one great wall with 14th century windows is a relic of the first Dominican church; the second, of rather humbler directions, survives in part as a hall sometimes used for exhibitions. A little further south the Church of the Cordeliers – ie Franciscans – is roofless, but much of its cloister and east range remain, also as picturesque ruins.

In the afternoon we had two vineyard visits, both within a mile or so of the town; the cool of their underground caves a welcome relief from the heat of the sun. To the speleophile both were intriguing but quite different. The first had a meandering

⁴ But then again any space between two adjacent oval panels would look chalice-shaped....

warren of fairly random galleries, with the odd walled-up branch that was said to link to the next property. The second was more recent, utilising the 19th-century pillar-and-stall workings of a subterranean stone quarry – still with daily tallies of stone removed in 1860 pencilled on one wall. Both produced excellent wine – degustations, (tastings) involved around a third of a glass each and professional instruction in sniffing, swirling, eyeing up the colour (was it that of onion skins?) and then, after finally getting round to drinking the stuff, finding words to describe what it tasted like, mid-quaff and post-quaff.

Back to Montagne, the youngsters craving ice cream. The church in the village centre, St Martins, was open, but the interior has been so much scraped and renewed that hardly anything looks old; as suspected, the nave is entirely mid-19th century. Much more authentic is St George's church, about a quarter of a mile to the south. The nave and transepts here are 11th century – a really quite crude Romanesque south door and a pair of little round windows in the south transept gable – but the main apse and the tower raised over the north transept are 12th century, and much more refined in their details. The north transept retains its 11th century 'apsidole' but that of the south transept has gone leaving only a blocked arch.

Ended the day with an excellent feed in a little restaurant beside an old public washing place in downtown St Emilion, watching local cats coming to take the waters. Spectacular rose-red sunset.

Saturday 9th June. Moving North

Another splendid breakfast, a brief degustate with the chamber d'hote's own label, and then north, PFR driving. Stopped at Cognac, to which the youngsters had been attracted by the eponymous liquor, fungal fumes from which are blamed for turning the stonework of all the older buildings black. If it can do that to limestone what does it do to human innards? . Cognac had a Benedictine Abbey and its church, dedicated to St Leger (he of the horse race) is still with us, at least on the outside; there is a fine Romanesque west end and a tower on the north along with, oddly for France, a square-ended eastern arm in later medieval Gothic. Inside was a disappointment; absolutely everything seems to have been renewed in the 19th-century, with not an old stone visible. On the south the cloister remains as an open quadrangle, but the buildings are mostly 17th and 18th century, with some medieval fragments on the west, and inside the public library that occupies the ground floor of the east range. A little to the east of the priory has been the Couvent des Recollets another convent, now art galleries and shops; the open green square of the cloister was recognisable, but no church; all the buildings seemed 18th century bar for the eastern cloister walk, with a heavily-restored late Gothic vault. The old town – primarily west of the priory, on the slope down to the river - is largely 18th century, with the odd older timber-framed house, and a gateway with two big drum towers on the river bank, serving a bridge removed in the 19th century. The Chateau just within has 15th century parts, but its guided tour seemed a bit expensive; instead we had a diverting hour in the market place watching a local event, first live dog beautification (to loud music) was performed by the local firm Chien Chic⁵ and then the groomed and decoratively over-

⁵ At one point three young assistants with aerosols, combs and clippers wrestled simultaneously with a canine cross between Dougal and a haystack; was this extreme dog grooming?.

dressed dogs were paraded by groomed and decoratively under-dressed human models, before applauding crowds.

Back to a hot car, and a few miles north-west to Abbaye de Font Douce, a very picturesque site in a wooded valley. This was a Benedictine house: what remains is basically the East Range (a fine if somewhat restored 13th-century chapter house with an 18th-century house, facing south, planted on top of it) forming an L-plan with a block projecting to the east of its north end, which turns out to house a pair of apsidal chapels, one above the other, both barrel-vaulted and with incised consecration crosses round their walls. Said to have been the first building on the site, they are very Grandmonitine in feel – in fact the house is said to have founded Chassay Grandmont in the Vendee. The larger and later monastic church has gone except for parts of its south transept, the bases of the south-west crossing pier and south wall of the nave, and a few footings.

The unroofed undercroft of the southern part of the East Range is still in the process of being disinterred by archaeologists. The South Range has gone but for the altered kitchen block at its west end; part of the east side of the West Range survives, and a batter-preserved detached north-south block a little to the south. Attractive gardens and the water flowing through a whole series of channels (including a surprising open conduit through the chapter house) make this quite a memorable place.

Another couple of hours, and a supermarket stop on the outskirts of Niort, eventually brought us to Mouilleron at c 20.30 hours; consternation when ELR could not find our key for Martin and Ginni's house, but a neighbour thankfully had a spare. Fed in the square at the Grillon, once again excellent fare.

Sunday 10th June

First day of (relative) rest. 10.00 am Mass in the parish church, pretty full but mostly with 50 plusses; printed words to the hymns but some had too many words to the line for first-time singers. Then to Bouzages for a Vide Grenier ('Empty Attic'), ie a car boot sale, lots of tables around the medieval tower and church piled with junk. PFR bought some old coins but was not allowed to purchase an ancient full-size video camera. After lunch a walk up to Mouilleron's windmills, a bit hot and sultry; thunderstorms are forecast but have not come yet.

Monday 11th June.

A non-tourist day; trip to the supermarket at Chantonay, to buy lots of food and a pushbike, which ELR rode back as far as Bouzages from which PFR rescued her in the car; he then rode the bicycle round the block and one of its pedals fell off... Otherwise a day of essay writing, food preparation and other things that do not really need chronicling.

Tuesday 12th June

Weather still fine, misty early, warm and sunny later. Youngsters went for walk to Cheffois, oldsters back to Chantonay with bike and detached pedal; salesman managed to get it screwed back in. Returned by ELR's cycle route of the previous

date to a quarry we had noted; might it yield fossils? Called at farmhouse alongside, farmer very chatty but said there were few fossils in this area – last one had been found in 1976. He however had an ammonite his son had found at Luçon, and insisted on giving it to us, for which we were very grateful. Then back to Mouilleron, and phonecall from kids in Cheffois, who were hungry; PFR went and retrieved them, and managed to look at the church, which is an interesting semi-fortified one from the Wars of Religion; the north side is all huge buttresses topped by little turrets. Then to Bouzages again, Lindsay riding the bicycle; had a look at the Donjon and its medieval garden and 16th century dovecote. Oddly Scottish in feel – a splendid lofty slab of a tower house (six floors) with a projecting jamb containing the newel stair and a variety of chambers – some fine fireplaces, corbels etc although all the timber floors seem recent, along with the pendant gallery at the top which gave excellent views of the surround countryside. Attached has been a thick-walled yard with a variety of buildings, some in part ancient, and to the north is the garden and dovecote. PFR tried to ride bike back; within 100 yards seat came loose (ie swung back as soon as it was sat upon to form a skyward-pointing spike that threatened severe personal damage), forcing a sweaty snuffly five-mile walk back to Mouilleron wheeling the wretched thing.

Evening barbecued in the back garden, Lindsay in command. Lots of smoky meat, and trying to distinguish between very good vin rouge (St Emilion Grand Cru) and cheap table wine; both are red, come in bottles, and make one sleepy.

Wednesday 13th July

A gentle trip north and north-east from Mouilleron, up the road that climbs and winds through the narrow streets of Reamur and Montournais to the little town of St Mesmin, and then east to Beauchene, where the road atlas showing ‘Ancient Abbaye’. It was wrong; there was an Augustinian convent but it was not all that ancienne, only dating back to the mid-19th century, although it had certainly had a chequered history since then. The parish church beside it was interesting however, being almost square in plan, five quadripartite vaulted bays making an equal-armed cross, with smaller chapels in the eastern angles, a full size bay to the north-west and a smaller tower to the south-west.

Then to the Chateau de St Mesmin, a km or so east of the town, and a most worthwhile visit at 4E, with sundry dressed-up medieval persons wandering around and a guide sheet that was almost in English. The late 14th/15th century castle consists of a small rectangular court between three-storeyed ranges, backed by a ring of circular towers with a larger round donjon to the south-west. It was in a pretty desperate state until the 1990s, but has now almost all been re-roofed, and floors put back in the donjon, which has a machicolated gallery just below the top. It had been surrounded by a moat, now dry, and is reached by a bridge from the south, from a larger rectangular outer court bounded by 17th century farm buildings, also under restoration.

The parish church in St Mesmin is a bit disappointing; typical Vendee tower on the north of the nave, which is, as often, vaulted and buttressed, but the transepts and east end all look 19th century. Montournais church was better, with twin four-bay naves of the 14th/15th century, the northern having a 12th/13th century west tower and the

southern fine doorways on both west and south and a south-east sacristy; the twin apses at the east end were however much more recent.

At the back end of the day a trip to La Grainitiere, the modern Benedictine abbey recolonising the ruins of an old one, where we attended vespers last year. However we remembered vespers as at 1900, whereas it was 1800 and were too late; sat around for a while, and departed. There are unique problems of getting lost in this area (also encountered last year), especially around a village called St Paul en Pareds; about 1 km west of the village, when you think you are following a road clearly shown on the map, the entire landscape abruptly reverses. You are on a road heading east, and meet a T-junction – but right is south and left is north – everything reverses. Fortunately there are signs pointing to the abbey – it is not where you expect it to be, or where the map shows it, but you get there. We tried to get back by a different route, and met a similar problem – drove c 10km, trying to head south all the time – and suddenly we were back where we started! Not really a timewarp – is it a spacewarp, or perhaps more correctly a landscapewarp?

Thursday 14th June

Heavy showers before breakfast, but the day mostly dry, although overcast; persistent rain set in at teatime.

ELR stayed in Mouillerron; others back to Chantonay supermarket for a third time, buying vin and other necessities, then back to Sigournais which we had discovered on the way back the previous evening. Despite being unmentioned in the road atlas, this has a fine chateau. It is only officially open to general visitors in season (starting July) but we managed to book a visit for three (supposed minimum party size ten) at only E5 each (usual visitor tariff E4.5). Very amenable and friendly guide, although he had little English – we got by. The castle is a polygon with a series of round towers (now reduced to their largely ruinous lower stages, and concealed internally by ranges of later farm buildings) but with a big and complete gatehouse/donjon on the north; this is a rectangular block with two round towers towards the courtyard, but much plainer externally; the outer face is much plainer. At courtyard level the gate passage is flanked by chambers, all with transverse vaults; a broad newel stair (renewed) in the south-western turret gives access to the upper floors, now thrown into one, although the late 15th century trussed rafter roof survives, with much new timber. The gatehouse itself is of the late 14th century – Northumberland parallels like Dunstanburgh, Tynemouth and Morpeth come to mind. High up is a machicolated covered-in gallery (as on the donjon at Bouzages) and above that steep conical roofs on the two round towers and a steep hip-ended one on the block between,

Sigournais is an attractive village, with a second and later chateau now an ivied ruin, and an unusual church, cruciform with a western tower. The transepts look secondary, and have odd rounded angles that are nevertheless provided with shallow diagonal buttresses, which are in fact largely made up of re-used carved stones. These include three small cross slabs, several stones with diaper patterns of 12th-century character, and others with geometrical or floral patterns hard to categorise – are they Merovingian, or 17th/18th century? The chateau custodian turned up again, and was intrigued by the stones, and photographed them.

Friday 15th June. Mostly Churches

Spectacular downpour at breakfast time; bedroom window left open, small flood Resulted; dripped through into living room – in moving furniture to mop this up, found dead beetles and sawdust showing that floor boards are still being actively consumed; however all the holes help drain the water, and maybe the beetles got drowned.... Then had tea and brioche with the old lady over the road, and conversation Francais.

A final expedition, oldsters only, north-west and west from Mouilleron. First to **Chavagnes-les-Redoux**. Quite a broad nave, with a timber roof for once, with double-splayed round-headed windows and a west doorway just going pointed (c1200?); narrower crossing with tower on north and transept (largely C19) on south, and single-bay chancel; all these parts have quadripartite vaults. The tower is very typical of the area; a tall unbroken lower stage with heavy diagonal buttresses, and a semi-octagonal stair turret, then a belfry with a pair of round-arched openings on each side and a low pyramidal tiled roof. Then to the long and confusing village of **St Paul-en-Pareds** where we first found a tabac restaurant opposite the church, packed out with local can drivers etc (always a good sign); no choice, just the set midi menu (three courses, coffee, and as much red wine as you wanted) for 10E; no complaints whatsoever. The church advertises itself as 15th century, although the south door is still round-arched. Three-bay nave with north aisle (the eastern bay carrying the tower, although this is not apparent inside) and two-bay chancel, everything with ribbed vaults. Then to **Ardelay**, where the attractive little chateau was sadly only open Wednesday, Saturdays and Sundays; a moated mound with a ring wall and one projecting square tower, with immediately to the south a church that has clearly been extended west and given its second tower (and spire) in the C19. Ardelay is on the southern outskirts of **Les Herbiers**, which in the centre has an impressive church (Saint-Pierre). It now has a five-bay fully-aisled (and vaulted) body with a fine tower over the west bay, but there has clearly been a multi-phase building history as can be seen on the south, where the fourth bay from the west is older rubble and seems to have been the end of an earlier transept. Across the road to the south of the church is an old building (Ecole de Musique) with a medieval gate tower attached, bedecked with giant model butterflies. North of Les Herbiers the main road climbs steeply to the **Mont des Alouettes** with extensive views of the Vendee to the south, and two windmills flanking a tall Calvary, whilst across the road an 1832 Gothic chapel commemorates the Vendee uprising. Back round Les Herbiers, and south-west down a fast road to **les Essarts** which has a ruined chateau, only open in July and August, but quite well seen from the road. Allegedly 12th-century gatehouse (but looks later medieval) and a big square tower at one corner; inside one can glimpse the overgrown ruins of a post-medieval mansion with big spiral-twist pillars. Headed back east, got briefly lost but saw a hoopoe. Final stop at **St Hilaire-de-Vouhis** which has an interesting church. What looks like the eastern bay of an early C12 (?) nave survives, with a tower over the east end of its north aisle; both have blocked arches in the west front; there is a narrower single-bay chancel but its east wall has been removed and a whole 19th-century cruciform church expands beyond.

Slow progress in teatime traffic through the narrow streets of Chantonay and back east down the straight fast road to Mouilleron. In the evening, after another ten-minute downpour, PFR ventured out on the bicycle a third time (without mishap, if

fact it rode quite nicely) and Lindsay ran alongside; back up this morning's road for c 1 km to **La Jannoniere**, where there are some picturesque old farm buildings he wanted a photo of, then back in the gathering dusk through a network of good tarmac roads simply shown as tracks on the 1:25000 map.

Impressive aerobatic display by swallows in the street.

Saturday the 16th June. North again

The end of our stay in Mouillerron, but before leaving a quick visit to Pouzages to meet a local ammonite collector, whose house and garden were wondrously heaped with said fossils in vast numbers; he was also very generous so we (PFR anyway) came away staggering under cephalopodic weight, and very happy.

Left 11.30 (after the bedroom window disintegrated whilst ELR was trying to close the shutters) and drove quite a long way until left the main roads to seek what the map termed a 'pigeonnier souterrain' but failed to find any signs to it. Instead, however, we found a sign to the Priory of S Jean XI siecle at Le Bas Nueil and it turned out to be an intriguing site all mixed up with a cluster of farms and a mill. There were two churches; one, complete except for a cart entrance made under the east window, consisted of an aisleless nave and chancel, with a tower on the south of the chancel; the chancel as vaulted but the nave had a wonderful trussed rafter roof. There had been a second larger church to the east, with its axis a little to the north; of this the north side of the aisled and apsidal eastern arm survived (some good Romanesque detail, lots of woodwork propping it up), with the cut-down north transept now a barn, with a farmhouse attached that seemed to represent the east range of a north cloister.⁶

A few km on a wonderful group of buildings came into view across the rolling cornfields – it turned out to be the Fortress of Berrye, with the old church alongside to the south. This is a wonderful and very strange place. At first it looks as if the buildings – tall gabled ranges encircled by a lower and ruinous curtain with a few small towers – just sit on the gently sloping valley side, but then you realise they are enclosed what is more a rock-cut chasm than a ditch, spanned by bridges on east and west. Entry is by the eastern bridge, and a notice pinned to the gate says it is 'libre et gratuite' - so we just walked in, and explored. It was nothing like one would expect of an ancient monument open to the public. Huge basement chambers, in one of which an ancient dust-covered Mercedes was parked, creaking doors onto newel stairs with alarming cracks in the sides, scuttlings and squeakings of rats, a barn owl perched in the roof timbers in one attic, a skeletal horse scattered on the floor of one vault, the odd section with shelves of books and furniture that must still be inhabited (by who? Is the last Duke still scraping out an existence within his mouldering pile). A detached steep-roofed block had clearly been a chapel, and still had fragmentary wall paintings of angels. Everywhere there were portals of tunnels and caves dropping into the native rock. One very conveniently had a light switch beside it, illuminating a series of light bulbs just sufficient for one to thread ones way through a maze of galleries and emerge in the bottom of the rock-cut ditch, which was lined on both sides by further portals into the underworld, the odd one still with a locked door.

⁶ Subsequent research on the web shows that the Art gallery at Worcester in the USA has taken the chapter house from this priory

A few km north is the village of Pouancay which has a church that looks as if it may be of 18th century date; the south transept gable has a remarkable incised sundial, the equivalent of one of those high-tech chronometers with a dozen different functions; it even seemed to include a moon dial.

Then into Saumur; found a car park with broken meters so we didn't have to pay, and wandered the town for an hour or so. The Chateau looks very impressive but is still closed for renovation, as it was last September. Found the church of Notre-Dame-de-Nantilly but its Romanesque facade, except for the almost Moorish cusped doorway, seemed all restoration, and was blindly bright in the westering sun.

Got lost in the last couple of km before our chambre d'hôte, La Balastière – despite having stayed there less than year ago - and had a frustrating half hour searching minor roads populated by droves of bikers before eventually locating it. Found the creperie we had previously frequented with less difficulty, and it had not changed – still excellent. Late evening drive into Chinon looking for a church for the morrow.

Sunday 17th June. A Rainy Day – and Angers

Up early, fine breakfast, brief shop in Avoine, then to church (St Etienne) in Chinon – felt relaxed and friendly – and wandered the brocage taking place on the nearby streets, although increasingly heavy rain was forcing the stall holders to retreat behind plastic sheets, or flee to their vehicles. Why is there a red and obviously English telephone box on the river front in Chinon holding a standard French telephone?

Rain increased as we set off to Angers. Stopped to seek lunch in Bourgeuil; tried to sit outside (under the canopy) of a market place café but were forced into smoky interior as the downpour threatened to bring it down – and food took a long time to come. Then got caught up in a cycle race... Bourgeuil has both an Abbey (looks to have a Romanesque church and post-medieval buildings) and an interesting looking c1200 parish church, but we had no time. Spray-filled motorway for 70 km to Angers, but it did deliver us right into the city centre to a free parking space right by the Chateau.

The Chateau of Angers is un-chateau-et-un-demi even by French standards; a huge trapezoidal enclosure with tall curtains studded by drum towers which, Caernarvon (and Constantinople-) like have decorative bands of white sandstone against dark schist. All sorts of interesting things inside; towards the river one wall of an early hall block, is fabric 10th century but most of its features later (although one good 12th century doorway survives). One range of royal lodgings remains with a fine later medieval chapel, and a modern gallery housing a fantastic late 14th century tapestry illustrating, very graphically, the Book of Revelation, guaranteed to have triggered many a medieval nightmares. Surfaced from the gallery to find that, thankfully, the deluge had stopped. Unfortunately only the wall walk on the entrance (north east) side of the fortress is currently accessible; when it is all open it is said to stretch three-quarters of a mile.

Angers has much more of interest, but we had barely an hour. That allowed a quick glance at the former abbey church of Toussaint (13th century; the ruined shell has a modern steel-and-glass roof and now houses a museum of 19th-century sculpture. A

few blocks away the Collegiate Church of St Martin has a 10th century crossing tower and transepts and an 11th century nave, although much of this (including all the north arcade) is a very convincing recent rebuild. There is also a superb 12th-century apsidal chancel and a modern 'crypt', a sub-floor space with exposed footings and lots of stone coffins, including the apse of the original 5th century church and the eastern arm of its 10th century successor. Lots of models etc to illustrate the long and complex development of the building.

The Cathedral is very fine as well, but we did not have time for more than the briefest of glances – especially spectacular is the west portal, notable that the praising elders (the Book of Revelation again) are portrayed as playing guitars; above the west façade soars to an immense height with twin spires. Fragmentary remains of a cloister on the south of the nave. The square to the east (on the site of the Church of St Cross) has a tree that conveys friendly greetings (presented as a written text in French, German and English) to passers by; it is good to be reminded that some trees, at least, like us, considering what we do to them.

The journey back from Angers far more pleasant than the one there, in intermittent sunshine driving back east along the levee on the north bank of the Loire, which we guessed to be of 17th or 18th century date; the little villages along it had no apparent buildings of any earlier period, and their churches (often Classical, with some 19th century gothicisation) fronted onto the road, ie were orientated more or less north-south.

Elaine has a sty in her eye. The correct French word did not leap to mind; explained it as 'le maison de la petit cochon qui habite les yeux' which produced puzzlement.

Monday 18th June. Round trip in the Loire valley east of Chinon

Crossed the Vienne – Chinon's river, which joins the larger Loire a few km to the west, at Candides-St-Martin – west of Chinon then turned east. First stop at L'Ile Bouchard where signs pointed the way – occasionally (we had to ask in the end) through the narrow streets of the little town to the Prieure St Jean, which proved to be stunning, just the apsidal east end (with radial chapels) of a Romanesque church, now given its own protective roof. It was not of great size, but the carved capitals were stunning; both mythical beasts and some Scriptural scenes.

Then to Loches, where the younger end went to look round the Chateau and the older to Beaulieu-les-Loches, where one found the multiplicity of medieval buildings very satisfactory and the other the similarly medieval shopping and sanitary facilities rather less so. The Abbey here was founded in 1007 by the notorious Foulques Nerra, as his planned burial-place close to his Loches fortress. It was a major Benedictine monastery, but got thoroughly wrecked by the English in the Hundred Years War, and only partially restored afterwards. What we have now is a truncated and heavily restored church, with to the west of it the north aisle wall of the lost section of nave – this is early 11th century work, and stands in effect three storeys high despite only being an aisle wall – with the attached north-western belfry, a spectacular 12th-century piece. Beyond the Gothic eastern apse are ruins of the Romanesque chapels that preceded it, but these can only be glimpsed across gardens. Plans show that part of the chapter house survives but this is not readily visible; the pleasant little square in front

of the Mairie replaces the cloister. Just north of the 12th century tower is the former Church of St Leonard with a smaller 13th century belfry, and to the south-west of the Square the Prior's House. There are lots of other early buildings – a 12th-century leper hospital just inside the former south gate, a fortified building on the main street ascribed to the Templars, and much else we did not have time for.

Lunch in the square at Loches - big tasty sausages made up of bits you didn't look too closely at – and then north-west to Cormery, where we had arranged – with some difficulty – a guide to look at the abbey remains. The guide turned out to be a very pleasant married couple who ran the 'Friends of St Alcuin', a society dedicated to the preservation of the abbey. We ended up getting to know the site in quite some detail, and will write elsewhere about it at greater length. The peculiar charm of Cormery is that its extensive remains of both church and buildings and wondrously jumbled with a little maze of old streets, and include some outstanding architectural detail and intriguing archaeological complexity. In particular the west tower of the church – through the base of which a street now passes – is of 11th century date, but built onto an earlier (Carolingian?) west gable of the church. It is a pity that the west range, including the vaulted 13th century refectory, is in private ownership and inaccessible bar tantalising glimpses – it has a garden, concealed from the outside world, which includes the best-preserved section of the cloister arcade.

After Cormery came much getting lost in search of somewhere to buy a cold drink; we eventually bypassed Tours to the south and west and found ourselves on the north bank of the Loire heading west before locating a supermarket, where an employee overhearing English accents endeavoured, very politely, to sell us local wines. Now that does not happen in English supermarkets! Then we managed to locate a Gallo-Roman aqueduct; for 300 m or so a series of tall and tapering rubble piers ran alongside a minor road, with towards the south end eight round arches 7-8 m high surviving complete. At each end the piers degenerate into stumps and then stop, with no sign of where the structure might have come from or gone to.

And that was enough for the day, for most of the party; back towards the westering sun to the same Loire crossing that we had returned by last night, and La Balastaire again. PFR slipped out again to one last abbey, at Seuilly, about 6 km south-west of Chinon. It had been a Benedictine house, chiefly known for its associations with Rabelais; the information board gave a long excerpt from his over-the-top writing (supposedly humorous) and littler about the abbey except to say that the chapter house was now a restaurant and the 'tith barn' had an old roof structure. What is left is mixed up with 18th and 19th century buildings, and the interiors, accessible for free in the day, were now locked up. The chapter house, or rather its western façade, seems obvious, and there is a big buttresses north-south range rather too close to it to have formed the opposite side of a conventional cloister. No sign of the church.

In the evening, whilst soup took an eternity to warm, something strange. Just under the window of the room was a cave, an open pit into the tufa. It was here last year that troglodytes had partied, disturbing our sleep. This time there was just the distant babble and murmur of underground voices filtering up from its depths and the odd bang and clatter. The sounds gradually became clearer; were we hearing the approach of the undead raised from their subterranean sleep. When the undead emerged into daylight, the shocking truth became clear; they had taken the form, utterly

convincingly, of a couple of French farm workers. They were accompanied by a cavorting pair of Jack Russell terriers, clearly quite undead as well.

Tuesday 19th June. Chartres and Giverny

The penultimate day of our travels. Thunder, lightning and howling dogs (maybe the Jack Russells) in the night, but another fine petit déjeuner. It feels a long time since we saw a bowl of muesli.

We needed to travel fast to the north, and with the help of the motorway system (130 kph limit, in the mid- 80s (in dry weather) achieved it – to Chartres in a couple of hours. Travelling distances on French motorways is always frustrating as they put up big pictures at the sides depicting the chateaux and abbeys that you are missing.

Chartres is of course famous for its cathedral; the youngsters, pursuing alcohol in all its forms, had hoped to find Chartreuse here (because it sounds the same) but this was not to be. Elaine had planned to take a train on to Giverny to see Monet's garden, but the tourist guide has misinformed her; she would have had to go into Paris first. So we all had a feed (cheese and ham toasted sandwiches, 'croquette m'sieur') and had a look at the Cathedral. This is towards as Gothic and monstrous as European cathedrals get; soaring western spires, three amazingly-sculptured portals and virtually every window filled with 12th and 13th century glass. And yet, and yet.... The interior is a great gloomy barn, lots of old-fashioned Catholic candles⁷ flickering before what a Protestant might term idols, a surfeit of stone, plaster and glass art that suddenly turns the stomach, as surfeits tend to do. Chartres is a bit like a good curry, wonderful to start with, but then comes the sudden realisation that one more mouthful could have dire consequences.

PFR ready to plunge into the old town (which has remains of walls, lots of medieval houses and several interesting churches) but rest of party agreed sudden change of plan to all go to Giverny. This took almost two hours, and lots of detailed route finding – one of those journeys that goes against the lie of the land, or at least that of the human communications. The landscape is changing – Chalk is now the underlying stratum, and there are lots of buildings with flint walls and brick quoins and dressings, although in places there is a lot of old timber framing.

Giverny is basically a very pretty village with a house and gardens made famous by their association with the Impressionist artist Monet, an old man with a big beard on lots of reverential photographs. Monet had dodgy eyes, so he saw things in dots and splodges and thus painted them in a dotty splodgy way. He seems to have become the equivalent of a rock star, and lots of young groupies flocked here – including Americans, whom the guide tactfully says he did not like at first 'but was then fully reconciled to'. One feels it may have to add this, as the place is swamped by Americans today, who have obviously poured a lot of Transatlantic money into it. The gardens are now ablaze with both brightly-coloured flowers and brightly-coloured tourists. The famous lake in the water garden, with its rafts of water lilies, has a bridge at each end; at each visitors queue to pose, and bawl to their compatriots at the other end to take their photographs. Monet took years to paint these scenes, now a

⁷ Not strictly correct. These days they tend to have them in little glasses, often in red glass, like nightlights, rather than the tall thin ones that drip wax all over.

million digital cameras take a million digital photographs every second. And one cannot help noticing that a lot of the people look, well, ugly. Nature is usually beautiful, even when domesticated in the way that has happened here.; the gardens have been lovingly restored to their original condition, so we see them just as Monet did – but not quite. Perhaps visitors should be issued with spectacles with thick and distorting lenses so we do.

There is a sharp counterpoint to the natural beauty. Observe any assemblage of human beings and many if not all are attractive in their own varied ways – but for some reason, that is not the case here. Overweight, over-exposed, garishly-coloured short and T-shirts, a few with big curly moustaches and flowing locks apparently aping the eccentric styles of their art heroes of a century ago, and all wanting to take pictures of themselves to prove they have taste and are cultured, and above all that they have been and done Giverny..

Skies darkening and distant rolls of thunder as we followed the Givery valley up to Dangu, where we had thought we were staying. En route stumbled across the Chateau sur Epte, a romantic and overgrown ruin; a shattered circular keep crowns a lofty motte, and a deep ditch encloses a bailey to the north and east which seems to retain most of its curtain wall, with square gate towers to both east and west. It now contains a run-down farm (with a big circular dovecote) guarded by several ‘chien mechant’ and ‘privee’ notices hanging from the western gatehouse.

Arrived at Dangu but were not expected; ELR had rung a couple of days before to check they had our booking (done by e mail, but without getting any response), and a girl helping out, perhaps thinking one English name sounded like another, had said oh yes. In fact it was another English foursome who were booked in – Madame was remorseful, so much so that she booked us in at a modern hotel at Vernon, and insisted on paying our bills there....

So back south-west to Vernon, towards black skies forked with lightning; the storm struck whilst we searched for the hotel, forcing us to sit out a quarter of an hour of climatic violence in the car park of the Buffalo Grill, next to Ronaldland (after Ronald Mc Donald, the....no, I don't think you want to know any more). In fact it proved to be a few km further west, well out of town and on a hilltop as its name Mount Vernon' suggests. Comfortable but soul-less, ate indifferent food alongside droves of businessmen, but room hot and sticky. PFR sleepless snuffling night; cold tap would produce nothing but water as lukewarm as that Revelation comment on the Laodicean church. Neither hot nor cold so that ‘I will spue thee out of my mouth’.

Wednesday 20th June. Home

Journey home, briefly told. Swift drive to Rouen; Elaine's plan – drop kids and luggage at station, then she takes taxi to car hire place (3 km away through a nightmarish maze of streets) pursued by PFR in hire car, then both return in taxi. Cases now incredibly heavy, containing many bottles of wine, fossils, and one of those French bowling games with eight chromium-steel balls, just to add ballast. One long escalator on the Paris metro was not working, but friendly locals helped out – Lindsay was carrying the really heavy one. At Gare Nord security once more picked out Elaine – the X ray made her pair of cheese knives look suspicious. In London

quick taxi (£10) from Waterloo to King's Cross – Ken Livingstone's congestion charge has really cleared the streets . Time for takeaway curry and fish-and-chips before catching the 1830 north through a sunlit evening, home 11.15, all well.