
Strauss Annual Report & Travelogue 2016

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Another year in the whirlwind of life is drawing to a close, with still no moss growing under our feet! The concept of 'feet' (one foot, anyway) did play a significant part in our year, but more on that anon. The more enjoyable theme of 2016 was making more significant time to catch up with friends we seldom see.

After a quiet Christmas at home, jigsaws, films and specials on the telly providing adequate diversions, and a New Year's weekend spent with friends in Bath, winter followed a familiar pattern of attending and working in



the theatre, including the panto 'Old Mother Hubbard Goes Out West', and the making of detailed plans for our camping tour and other comings and goings during the year. Pat continued to be involved with activities centred around the Master's House, in particular an oral history project, recording memories from several older Ledburians who were born and/or raised in the town. Their fascinating stories spoke largely of a different time, when so many tasks we automatically associate with machines were done manually, when outside loos were more common than fridges and when the High Street was full of small grocers' shops who delivered your order to your house and flocks of sheep were walked

down the roads to the local butcher's for slaughtering. A strong thread was how more usual it was for people to rely on common sense to get them through situations and keep them out of trouble than rigid health and safety regulations. 'We just got on with it' was a commonly heard phrase!

By mid-March the sun was shining and the daffodils were enticing us out on our bikes, both locally and further afield. The highlight was a nine-day break taking in the Tandem Club's Easter weekend in the New Forest, to which we added visits to long-standing friends in the area and on the Isle of Wight, cycling across that island from west to east. Knowing that the New Forest is laced with dirt cycling trails, we took our mountain bikes and made a special effort to explore deeper into the trees than we'd have ventured with standard tyres - a much more rewarding experience than being confined to a ribbon of black tarmac with the noise of cars breaking the silence of the woods. We enjoyed great company and plenty of sunshine ... well, most of the time!



Theatre and history are generally two separate threads for us, but they came together in a magic way in April when the actors from the local am dram group put on a specially written period drama, *The Visit*, in the Master's House, portraying a likely 'day in the life' of those who lived and worked there in medieval times. The Master himself was having a bad enough day from indigestion, when he learned that the Dean of Hereford Cathedral was paying him an unexpected visit the following day. The play was enacted in the beautifully restored Main Hall, where the Master had been dining, with

his various servants attending him, and in the old kitchen (now the library, though the books seemed to fade into the background as the story progressed) where the cook had to coerce his staff into pulling a mini-feast almost out of thin air to welcome the Dean, who arrived, literally, on horseback into the courtyard. An exhibition of photos taken of the cast members and a display of costumed mannequins around the building keep the spirit alive.



The annual gathering of the Short Cranks in May was organised this year by our once-shortest member, Amy, the daughter of the man who brought us together 23 years ago. A very little girl then, she has now worked her way right up to the opposite end of our line-up! As usual, the social side of the weekend was brill, with non-stop

chatter keeping even the birds awake! As for the cycling, the cracking pace set by our leader through the leafy lanes of Surrey in somewhat hilly terrain provided a challenge, but every mile contributed to our fitness in preparation for our annual camping tour in June. Well, that was the plan, anyway.....

In the flash of a second, we were beset by a wee bit of bad luck. One morning, as Pat was hurriedly dashing up the stairs to our apartment,

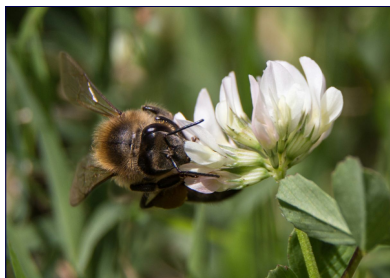


her right shoe didn't quite make a step, resulting in one very painful foot. An x-ray showed a visible break, but the nice doctor in the fracture clinic decided it didn't need to be plastered up, giving her instead a big plastic boot to clomp around in and a pair of crutches, saying the bones would heal just fine on their own and reassuring her that in four weeks she might be able to walk around pretty much as normal. Cycling, however, was not on the cards so soon.

We had to write off a week at the International Tandem Rally in Holland, and the following week cycling through Belgium and France to Paris where the Bike Bus was going to pick us up, but she was determined to go on our camping tour somehow! Fortunately, a couple who come on our tours in their campervan offered her a lift from campsite to campsite. But clouds are meant to come with silver linings, and the two extra weeks at home allowed her to continue with a family history course. Through an

amazing quirk of luck, she found a hitherto unknown relation in Australia with whom she shares a great-great-grandfather! Several emails later, with a lot of research help by her Australian cousin, Pat was able to extend the chart of her ancestral lines back to Australia in the mid-1800s and Lincolnshire in the 1500s. A suspected link to Ireland was partly confirmed through data acquired about the g-g-grandfather's wife, who was shipped off to Australia as an orphan, though her parents remain a mystery! We must not let it go unsaid, though, how much of this was made possible by the generous help given by so many people in town!

Three weeks in the Cévennes and Tarn Gorges area of France in June marked our 30th year leading CTC tours. Mike quite enjoyed riding at his own pace and travelling mostly unladen between campsites, while Pat got to see at least some of the routes she had spent weeks planning, could shop and get the tent erected (with some help!) during the day *and* had time to take all the photos of flowers and bugs she wanted to *and* read loads of books (thanks to a borrowed Kindle!). Even just sitting



around the campsites, in such glorious surroundings, gave her a much-needed rest and kept up her spirits! Our evenings were spared the usual rush of shopping, showering, cooking and then eating in the gathering dusk! Everything took more time, and walking across the uneven ground of a campsite with crutches wasn't easy, but for once time was not at a premium, and that was bliss! In the final week she ventured into towns (on crutches) twice and was starting to walk very short distances unaided and unbooted!

Ledbury's annual Poetry Festival was in full swing when we got home at the beginning of July, with the town turned out in party style and lively events taking place in the decorated streets. We wasted no time getting into its rhythm! Of the three or four events we attended most days, a few stood out from the rest: a lighthearted reading by three lovely voices over two days of a variety of translations of Homer's *Odyssey*, with live musical accompaniment; a talk on old and new rhymes and pronunciations, which explained why Shakespeare's work doesn't always seem to rhyme; a 1944 film *Henry V*, featuring a very young Laurence Olivier and very dated filming techniques; and an imaginatively produced *The Book of Job the Musical*, sung and spoken in an almost rock 'n roll fashion. Badge making for August cycling events occupied lots of July hours, as she who cuts out the circles still couldn't stand for very long at one time. But by the middle of the month, though, it was time to find out whether she *could* ride her own bike!



Two short test rides gave a cautious thumbs up, so at the end of the month we set off for five weeks, starting with the annual Semaine Fédérale cycling festival, this year based in Dijon. Wanting to build up Pat's foot strength gradually, we became quite familiar with the Canal de Bourgogne, its towpath providing plenty of level cycling, nice views and lots of photos of flowers and damselflies, but as Pat's foot felt more comfortable we ventured into lumpier countryside. A serious downpour one evening flooded our tent porch and brought on a major infestation of huge slugs around us, inspiring slug-slinging contests and slug swimming lessons, but the villages and towns we cycled through welcomed us with lots of decorated bikes and sunshine.



Once back in the UK we took a meandering route from East London to Suffolk over six days, staying with or visiting friends at each stop and benefiting from wonderful meals, great conversation, local route guidance and sometimes needed equipment help. And a chance to watch some of the summer Olympics! Cycling along the River Lea on our first morning was a delight, as was our revisit of Constable Country, particularly East Bergholt, where a large old wooden 'cage' houses the church bells at ground level, and nearby picturesque Flatford Mill where we chatted to some visiting Americans, assuring each other that Mr

Trump would never make it to the White House... The waterfronts at Walton on the Naze and Frinton-on-Sea provided a rather different view of life: beaches packed with people squeezed onto narrow strips of sand between seemingly unending rows of dark groynes and a continuous ribbon of little beach huts.

Framlingham served as the base for the third week, at the CTC Birthday Rides. We did only two proper rides, out to the coast, as we were buttonholed to act as couriers on two coach trips - one to Bury St Edmunds and Lavenham and one to Norfolk. Both provided rare (for us) opportunities to wander around places on foot as 'normal' sightseers. Somewhere near the top of the 'highlights' list was watching the full moon rise over Framlingham castle!



Our next leg was planned as a result of having lost out on our trip to Holland in May. We were allowed to reschedule our ferry tickets so, as Harwich is an easy day's ride from Framlingham, skipping across to the Channel for a week seemed the sensible thing to do. It also gave us the opportunity to visit the organisers of



the missed event, who have become good friends over the years. Starting with a morning ride via Delft to Leiden, we headed for Utrecht for our first social gathering - a very nice change to have the time to sit and talk without the usual interruptions a rally brings. Over the following five days we rode north, initially following our pre-planned course, but we soon accepted that the Dutch are very good at identifying nice routes for cyclists, so acquiesced to following their numbered routes more consistently. Canals and other waterways (and windmills!) featured largely in our travels, as one might expect, but the scenery was always changing, and the old part of towns provided fascinating after-dinner walks. Other

sightseeing was minimal, though the small star-shaped village of Bourton, formerly a military fort near the German border, was well worth the couple of hours we gave it. Our final stop, near Groningen, provided a much-appreciated three-night rest with long-standing Dutch friends. We chatted and laughed till we dropped, then did it all again the next day. A fluke of timing meant that an annual open-air event was being held just out of town one evening during our stay, so the four of us joined a peloton of local cyclists making their way to what turned out to be an amazing Rolling Stones tribute concert!

Our travels concluded with a long weekend for owners of Flying Gate cycles, held near The Wrekin in Shropshire. Four weeks of cycling ought to have brought us to an enviable level of fitness, but when it came to the hills of Shropshire, well... As usual, though, we had a great



time with those who attended, most of whom we see only at this event each year, and regaled them with tales of our recent travels. The weather was kind (mostly) and the scenery pleasant enough, though aside from stops in Much Wenlock and Iron Bridge, we were usually pedalling too hard trying to keep up with the group to stop for photos!

Having covered nearly 1000 miles, we returned home to settle back into the other half of life for the last three months of the year - lots of theatre work and Master's House involvements scattered through each week. The local am dram group gave some very impressive performances of *Wuthering Heights* (her exquisite lighting might have contributed...), and they sold out three repeat performances of *The Visit*. With nearby Leominster providing the base for a reunion of our French camping tour group, it almost felt as if we were taking them on rides on our own patch. Pat has started up a new study group to document who lived in and/or used for what purpose all the buildings on the second main street in Ledbury, from the present day back to the mid-1800s.



To fill in the gaps (ha!), she has started on a photography project for the Ledbury Food Group, who want a record of the activities that take place at a fruit farm over the course of a year. So off she goes every couple of weeks or so, on her bike or the bus, to a farm about 10 miles south of Ledbury and spends an hour or two walking around the orchards and snapping away. On one day near the end of the picking season, she was allowed to join the pickers on their vehicle as it progressed between the rows of trees, giving her a very close-up view of their work. The team, from Bulgaria, were very friendly and helpful, showing her around the

estate and pausing on occasion to save her photos from motion blur. Pressing the fruit and bottling the resulting juice also got well documented. On one very chilly morning in November she spent nearly three hours in one particular orchard, capturing lots of lovely photos of frosty apples, trees and leaves. As a bonus, two men were netting birds to put rings on their legs and record such details as age, weight and wing length before setting them free. Both ringers and birds were very cooperative in posing for her camera and proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that a bird in hand is worth any number in the bush!



Mike's our rock, with a more constant through the year. When we're not travelling, he spends much of his time intently watching his computer screen. He's still treasurer for the Upper Hall Estate and supports the CTC Tours company by attending board meetings and number-crunching for them. Our computer network has become more complex with time, bringing his (operating) IT stable up to 4 computers, 20 disk drives, 8 printers, 2 tablets, and 2 mobile phones. He's also in charge of keeping our financial records, an ever-increasing challenge as tax laws on both sides of the Atlantic grow in complexity each year. Producing enough income from our assets to keep us going has been reasonably successful, if rather time-consuming, but we do let him out regularly to do enough food shopping to keep the wolf from the door.

Pat & Mike

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