
Strauss Annual Report & Travelogue 2019

vol 3, no 21



One might think that, after over 40 annual letters, we'd run out of things to write about... Not a chance! Every year is still an adventure, with even the hardy annuals in our calendar bringing new experiences!

The ink had barely dried on our 2018 letter when Pat was approached about taking over a map project from Barbara Davis, a local artist who had been working on it but had fallen seriously ill. When the large-format work-in-progress was laid out on the table, it was immediately obvious that it would need a lot of cleaning up, work Pat had done for walking maps Barbara had created, but the bombshell dropped when it emerged that the final product had to be large enough to go onto a wall in the Poets' Corner in a nearby church – 10ft wide by 6.5ft tall! Getting the original precision-photographed at very high resolution in six sections and joining them together was a minor challenge; spending countless hours in Photoshop erasing stray lines and marks, standardising on consistent colours and fills to designate land use, footpaths, bridleways and other rights of way, making roads clear and of a constant width, adding Barbara's sketches of the houses in which the famous Dymock poets lived and introducing new place names (created from letters she had already drawn) kept Pat glued to her graphics tablet for weeks! When the final product, professionally printed on a huge sheet of heavy vinyl, was unveiled, they almost got the church bells ringing for the occasion, but sadly it coincided with the memorial service for Barbara, who never got to see the finished product.



Mike put his videography skills to work twice early in the year, first for the local am dram group's annual panto at our theatre and then in March for an affiliated group's amazing production of *Oliver! The Musical*. He has perfected his technique to the point where he needed to make only two recordings to be sure of getting good material for Pat to blend into a final version for the cast. Pat got involved in setting up and running the lighting, as usual, but with added help from the director who loaned the theatre several LED lanterns for the play. Their ability to put out any colour one wants added tremendously to the atmosphere of the play, particularly the darker scenes in the workhouse and the night scenes in the street. Her knowledge of what is possible got a bit

of a boost! (Photos on www.flickr.com/photos/lads-ledbury/albums)

A day visit in April to Bletchley Park, the principal centre of Allied code-breaking during World War II, was a fascinating eye-opener. The incredible amount of effort put in by so many local people to intercept and decipher encrypted enemy messages was explained and illustrated through many



display boards, photos and bits of original equipment, including the famed Enigma machine. The whole process was far more complex than we could absorb in one day, but the crucial importance of being on top of this technical side of the war, and the skills people had to develop, came through loud and clear.



Rather unexpectedly (while relaxing at a campsite in France in June!) Pat received an email notifying her that she had been selected as one of the '100 Women in Cycling for 2019' and was thus invited to attend a Parliamentary reception at Westminster in July. Other than leading tours, most of what she had done to warrant such an accolade had been part of her London life, but the scheme was fairly new, so the organisers were 'catching up' with those who they felt were deserving. Her local fame shot up when the Ledbury Reporter ran an article about this, including a photo of her on her bike. And thanks to the wonders of the Internet, you can even read it now – www.ledburyreporter.co.uk/news/17832799.top-100-cyclist-pat/

Mike's involvement in the running of the CTC Tours company (through which we lead our annual camping tour in France) stepped up a few notches during the year. A reorganisation effort created an Operations Group, which he was invited to join, and though he managed to avoid becoming its chairman, he is an integral part of what can be an almost daily email discussion on changes that could be made to how Tour Mangers work and how best to move the whole programme forward.

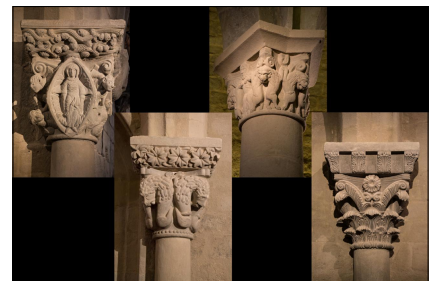


Speaking of tours ... yes, we did get out and about quite a bit this year! A few weekend events in March and April got our legs moving again after a winter break. Forays into the nearby lanes full of wild daffodils provided the first hopes of spring, followed by a very sociable weekend in Wiltshire, during which Pat got her first experience of using a GPS device on her bike – learning curve number 489! The Tandem Club's annual Easter meet, held in the Forest of Dean, within cycling distance of

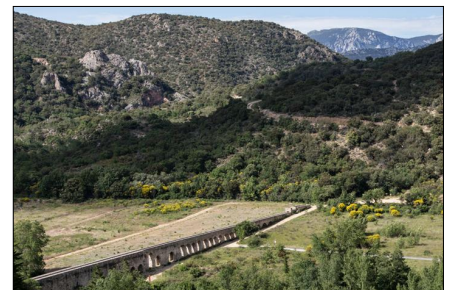
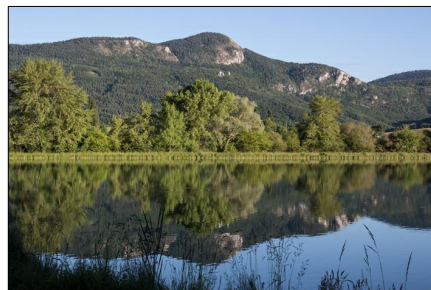
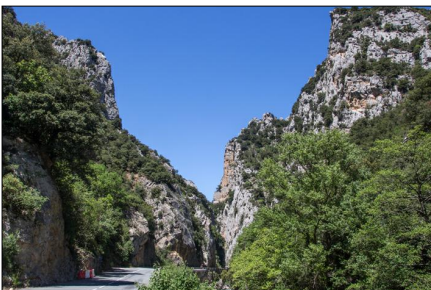
home, increased our annual mileage to date several-fold! Rides to Monmouth and Tintern Abbey and along the river Wye, filled with lots of colourful canoes, took us through lovely (if hilly!) countryside, and we were blessed with nearly perfect weather – fortunate, as we were camping! Ten days later we headed up to north Shropshire for a week with our Short Cranks group. As this has become our 'get ready for France' training period, we did our best to get up all the hills, though one or two got the better of one of us! We were spread out in three cabins, each with hot tubs, so had a comfortable base for sitting out bad-weather days and soaking tired muscles after rides on the good days.



Our annual camping tour in France was centred on the Languedoc area in the very south of the country. From our starting point in Narbonne, we had terrific winds for the first few days, but nearly cloudless blue skies, outcrops of bright yellow broom, fields of poppies intermingled with purple and white wildflowers and great views of the Pyrénées enhanced our rides. This was Cathar territory, many of the impressive castles of this medieval religious sect still standing in some state of ruin on top of some hill. Highlights of the first two weeks included riding through a dramatic gorge between towering walls of solid rock, camping on the edge of a beautiful lake full of very



lively fish, enjoying some quiet time in the seven-sided circular 12th-century church in Rieux Minervois, serenely lit with beautifully carved capitals on the columns, and walking the length of a still-functioning aqueduct stretching across a wide valley, partly on a walkway built under its watercourse.



One most impressive sight was the Étang de Montady near Beziers, a vast circular agricultural area, once a smelly swamp, laid out in triangular segments by monks in the 13th century, with irrigation ditches separating the segments like spokes in a wheel and a drainage hole in the centre. And we think our agricultural practices are clever! From there we turned north then west into hillier and more remote landscape for a few days – offering great views but



pushing our legs close to their limits -- before descending to gentler terrain with vast fields of garlic and more wildflowers, riding along a short stretch of the Canal du Midi and taking in the very attractive and interesting city of Castres. All in all a great month of cycling, living in the great outdoors and relaxing with good friends!



Six weeks after our return we were back in France yet again, starting with a week in Cognac at the annual Semaine Federale cycling rally. Not being responsible for anyone else, we can just follow as much of



the routes set out by the organisers as we want, being taken past interesting things we might never have found on our own, such as an old, nearly forgotten abbey church down a track that didn't go anywhere and a collection of stone sculptures carved from huge blocks of white stone during an international festival that draws artists from all over. Not to forget the dozens and dozens of decorated bicycles along the routes that brought smiles to our faces, and the presence of thousands of other cyclists also enjoying themselves.



For weeks two and three we were on our own, riding over to and down the west coast of France to Bayonne, nearly at the Spanish border, then taking a meandering route to get to the International Tandem Rally at Marciac, just north of Tarbes. Thanks to very helpful friends in a large motorhome, all our camping kit was transported for us, allowing us to enjoy the friendly hospitality of Airbnb owners. Our itinerary included several well-made cycle paths and lots of very flat roads. A spacious beautifully-appointed room on our first night, in the home of a wonderful Belgian couple, was definitely one of the highlights, sharing their home-cooked meal, local hooch and an animated conversation in well-practiced Franglaise!



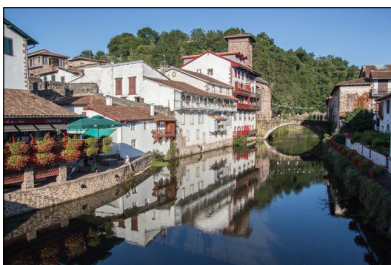
We did a little exploring of the harbour at Arcachon, seriously dedicated to the harvesting of oysters (and dredging shell-encrusted bikes from the water!), then taking a 'rest' day we cycled to (and walked up) the largest sand dune in Europe. Any notions we might have had



of emptiness, though, were shattered, as hundreds of other people were already up there! And we'll never forget the very long day we did getting to Bayonne, mostly on very flat roads lined with trees and trees and more trees and even *more* trees, none of which were photogenic, though they did vary in size from time to time...

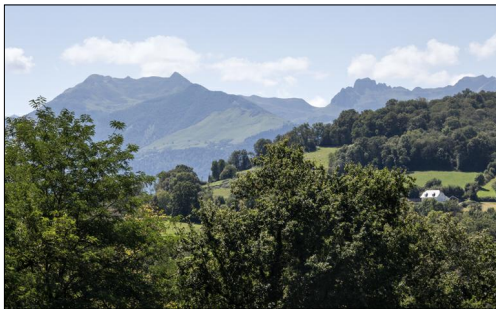
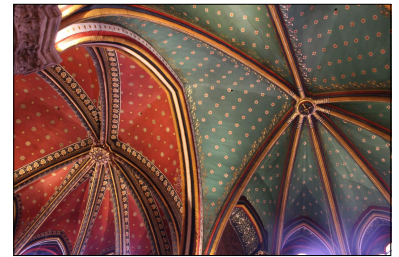


Hoping to get closer to the Basque culture, on one of our two free days in Bayonne we took the train to St-Jean-Pied-de-Port, a very popular staging town on the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostella in Spain. Its museum, in an old prison, gave us a good insight into the history of the famous pilgrimage and kept us out of the baking hot sun for a good while. We treated ourselves to a long lunch and enjoyed some local music-making in the streets and bars. Mostly we just wandered around the town, enjoying its festive mood and admiring the craft work in the shops lining the narrow streets. Welcoming travellers at the rail



station was a very creative metal 'statue' of St Jean (aka St Jacques, San Juan and Sant Iago).

Bayonne itself wasn't quite as interesting, though we did find ourselves taking lots of photos of the long row of very old houses lining the canal, and the cathedral ceiling displayed perhaps the best example of the beautiful paint and gilt treatment we'd seen inside a number of churches along the way.



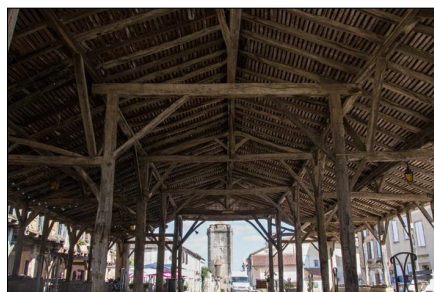
Back on the road again, we got even closer to the Pyrénées, near enough to actually see how green they were! A two-night stop in Oleron-Ste-Marie gave us time to wander around that town and admire its churches. We often went into churches to admire their architecture, stained glass windows and painted surfaces displaying the wonderful artistic



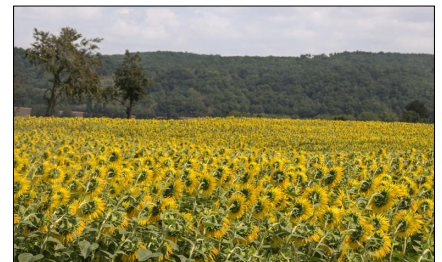
skills of times past. And they were cool when we needed relief from the summer heat! Impressively framing the 12th-century main door of this former cathedral were two arches with wonderfully-preserved ornate carvings – several high-ranking musicians on one row and ordinary men salmon fishing and boar hunting just below. And St Jean was there as well!



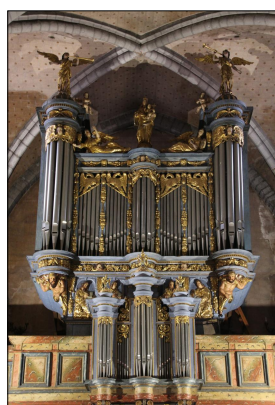
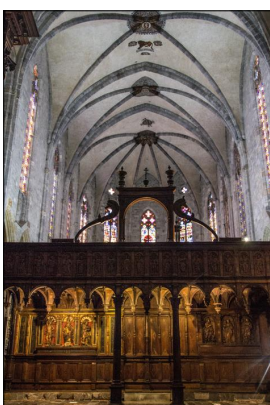
By the end of our third week we were happily settled into our little tent at the tandem rally, with the addition of a small table and chairs, thanks to our neighbours, and loads of good company all around us. The nature theme, though, changed dramatically, with no mountains in view but zillions of sunflowers and corn fields everywhere!!! Lots of lovely quiet roads for cycling and pleasant distant views, though not much to tempt our cameras out of their cases. On one day, though, we



came across a whimsically painted water tower touting the pleasure of taking walks in the open countryside. And in the nearby village of Bassoues we found a massive 14th-century castle keep towering over nearly everything, next to a very large and impressive 16th-century timbered market hall.

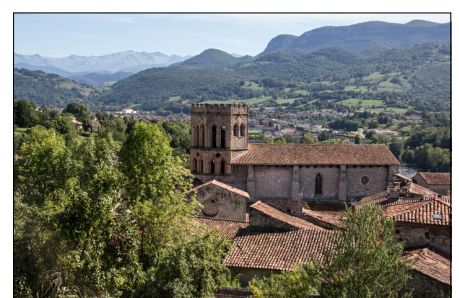


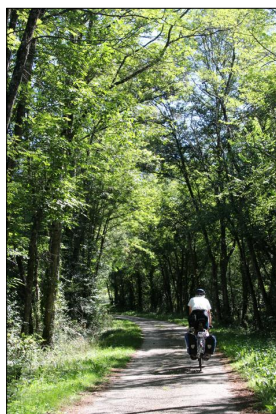
Too soon we pushed off for our final week, dipping south again almost to the Pyrénées then meandering generally east, passing through or stopping at some lovely towns. We spent ages in the remarkable cathedral in St-Bertand-de-Comminges, admiring (and photographing) its huge organ and a large choir stall in the centre, fully enclosed by dark wood 'walls' carved within an inch of their thickness! It got a very high 'wow' score from us, despite being at the top of a very steep hill! Our two-night stop in the small but interesting village of St-Lizier had been planned more as a half-way point in the week than anything else, but we spent a happy day



meandering around its ancient cobbled lanes, following a walking tour and trying to imagine what it might have been like in medieval times.

The view from the Bishop's Palace at the top of the hill was wonderful, stretching across many miles to what had become our favourite mountains, a view we also enjoyed from the balcony of our hotel room. And St-Jean greeted us in the church!





Nearly the whole of the next day – some 30 miles worth – was on a wide and well-surfaced cycle track along the course of an old rail line. Zero traffic, lush peaceful countryside and no hills to climb! Heaven can't be better! At the tandem rally we had met another ex-pat American couple living in Limoux, our next stop, who had invited us to stay the night with them. The four of us having spent a considerable number of years living abroad as well as in the Los Angeles area gave us a unique rapport, with conversations started while in Marciac continuing over a very welcome home-cooked meal and local Limoux wine. It took wild horses to get us out in the morning, but our penultimate stop, Lagrasse, awaited us. The ride turned out to be the second

hardest of the entire five weeks, but once we'd done the climb we revelled in a long and gentle descent through pretty scenery and narrow gorges with just enough room for the road between towering walls of rock. On our final day, cycling into Narbonne, we clocked up the last of our 1000 miles – a journey that could be described as 'once in a lifetime', though we have hopes for riding between events in France next year.



Our final fling of the year was the reunion of our French camping tour group at the beginning of October. Although we weren't officially organising it, the venue chosen was only about two miles from our house, so we did help with devising the routes. The positive side was three days of cycling on our own patch (Ledbury is in the distance on the left), something we haven't done enough of in recent years, and sharing the beauty of our local lanes and some

interesting examples of rural life, such as the old tithe barn at right, with others.



As usual, there's a constant ribbon of 'life' connecting all these bits and pieces, far too much to mention here. Lots of theatre going (and lighting work for Pat), managing the accounts for local organisations, badge making for rallies, helping with and enjoying the Poetry Festival in July, history work, countless meetings and keeping the household finances alive. We count ourselves very lucky to have been able to keep sufficiently on top of things for yet another year and to have family and friends in good health. Two things had to go, though. Pat had to drop her weekly visits to camera club, partly for lack of free nights and partly because getting there became more difficult, thanks to changes to access to the platforms at our local rail station removing her ability to get her bike across the tracks; and she failed, from early in the year, to keep up with sending out birthday cards to friends, something she had done faithfully for many, many years.

There's so much more we could talk about, and show – we could write a book! But we'll stop here and wish everyone a wonderful holiday season, a healthy new year ... and a belated happy birthday!! Then we'll sit back and enjoy all the lovely Christmas cards we gratefully receive each year.

Pat & Mike

