

Strauss Annual Report & Travelogue 2022

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After two strange years of living with Covid restrictions, including wearing masks everywhere and not going into public places freely, this year saw a gradual return to 'normality' as the months progressed. To a certain extent it is a new 'normality', as care still needs to be taken, and some expectations have changed, but at a personal level we find ourselves back to enjoying life pretty much as we would like to. One significant improvement is working in and/or seeing a lot of productions at our local theatre, which comprise most of our cultural entertainment and take up a lot of Pat's time. On top of that was a full programme of annual cycling events and making the most of opportunities to catch up with friends we hadn't seen in all that time. Pat's French conversation and Photography classes restarted in person, and Mike was able to start seeing a chiropractor to straighten his back.

Staging the annual January Panto at our theatre had to be scrapped for the second year due to not being able to properly distance the usual host of children in the limited dressing room space.



However, a replacement 'Christmas play' was put on, giving a much-needed boost to the morale of LADS and audience members alike. Two plays in the year made quite an impression on us: the play *Leopoldstadt*, a powerful portrayal of the changes WW2 made to three generations of a once well-off Jewish family in Austria; and *Kindertransport*, a similarly poignant play condensing the organised rescue effort in 1940 of something like 10,000 children from Nazi-controlled Germany down to the complex and emotional personal story of a young girl sent to England through the programme. There were also some wonderful musical evenings: gypsy jazz from the accomplished

guitarist Remi Harris and very faithful tribute concerts to Jaques Brel and Simon & Garfunkel. Such high-level acting and musicianship were sorely missed during Covid. And one film stood out: *On The Basis of Sex* - the true story of the life of Ruth Bader Ginsburg - well worth watching!

With the demise of CTC Tours, we decided to 'go it alone'. Support from our regular group members encouraged us to run another tour in France, so organising one became a priority in the spring. Friends passing through Ledbury were able to visiting us *indoors*, not just through an open window!! And the Tandem Club was able to organise its first Easter gathering in three years in Oxfordshire, giving us a much-appreciated opportunity to meet up with a lot of people we hadn't seen in some time. There were a few cheerful glimpses of spring having arrived, and it felt really good just to get away for a long weekend on our bikes. Camping in April was pretty chilly, but helpful friends in the two campervans next to us very kindly heated up our dinners in their microwave ovens and shared the warmth of their heated vehicles in the evenings.



May kept Pat busy getting the theatre's end-of-year financial affairs wound up and passed over to the accountants for their annual examination, as well as spending time going through her treasurer's duties with her 'understudy' who was going to take over for her for much of the summer. Badge-

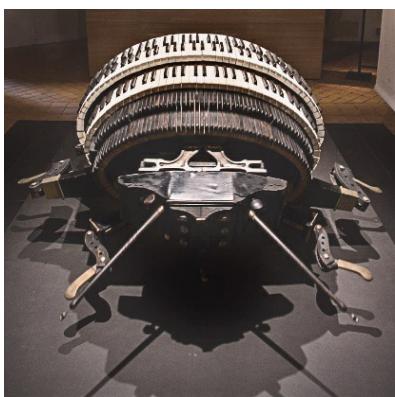
making for cycling rallies kicked in, plus printing route sheets and maps for our French tour. By the end of the month, though, we were camping again for a week in Corsham, Wiltshire with the Tandem Club. The days were pleasantly warm, but again the nights were cold, so we had to keep borrowing blankets to put over our sleeping bags! As at Easter, we mixed cycling on our own (we're rarely ready to go early enough to ride with others!) with lots of socialising and were able to work in visits to other seldom-seen tandem friends before and after. Being in fairly familiar territory, we took few photos, happy to just enjoy the lovely countryside, though with the



sunshine bringing out the best of its stone façade and yellow flowers in the foreground, Great Chalfield Manor did look rather attractive. In complete contrast, our ride along the Two Tunnels Greenway cycle track, following the line of a former rail line near Bath, turned rather spooky! An unexceptional entrance led to a very dark tunnel over a mile long and lit only just well enough to see where we were going if we rode slowly enough!

By mid-June we were off to Brittany!! Starting in St Malo, our route took us south via Combourg to Vannes before heading north again then west to explore some very attractive coastlines, before meandering eastwards via the wonderful town of Dinan back to St Malo for our return ferry. As the group assembled at our first campsite, a wonderful feeling of 'back to normal' bubbled up inside everyone. For the first two weeks the weather wasn't brilliant, and late one afternoon we sheltered from persistent rain so long that the two of us abandoned getting to the next campsite, as time to get there and shop for food before dark was too short. However, that gave us a sunnier ride the next day through the very attractive city of Vannes, stopping at a local summer fête to taste our first 'gallettes' (crêpes with savoury fillings) while watching and listening to a crazy street band. Pictures are worth pages of more words, so have a look at www.flickr.com/photos/pscyle/albums.

While based in Rohan we did a very enjoyable ride along a canal to the interesting town of Josselin, its 'half-timbered' buildings very colourfully painted. When we got back up to the north coast, the sun came out in force for the second two weeks, providing lovely views of the sea with its *very* wide beaches with *very* shallow waters interspersed between areas of rugged coastline. And warmer weather!



Two amazing sites we came across got full marks from us: one a display in a chateau of large mechanical 'insects' made from reused musical instrument parts; the other the Valley of the Saints - a display of 50 or so granite statues of ancient worthies, each 10-12 feet tall, in



varying styles, spread out over a vast grassy area. A short video showing some of the insect creations close up, many in motion, can be found on www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1Ix6Fgx9SE.

Ten days after our return from France, we were off again to cycle across The Netherlands to just over the western border of Germany for the International Tandem Rally. Before our sailing from Harwich, though, we managed to squeeze in a long-overdue visit with yet more friends, and had the honour of being the first guests using their recently fitted-out 'shepherd's hut' situated in a field of sheep near their house. Thankfully, shepherding duties were not expected of us!



On our first five days we passed through generally flat though pleasantly scenic countryside, covering longer distances than we are used to. It was good to be cycling *to somewhere*, rather than just in loops. We opted not to use our tent except for one night, so though we still had to carry all our



camping kit, we gained cycling time by not setting up or breaking camp. Almost exclusively we used the intricately-laced Dutch network of quiet roads and cycle tracks, many well away from motor traffic. Stopping for photos, though, didn't really figure much except for a longish stretch of



nearly car-free tree-lined road, well used by cyclists, that meandered through an undulating landscape of woodland interspersed with large areas of scrubby bare earth – quite untypical of Holland.

And so to the tandem rally in western Germany near Osnabrück. Knowing many of the nearly 130 people scattered around the campsite, it was a VERY sociable week. Although again we usually rode on our own during the days, we were never short of people to talk to in the mornings, at cafes along



the way and in the evenings. This event could almost be held in a black hole and we'd have a good time! One day featured a treasure hunt, asking us to place a dozen or so pictures in the order in which we came across them along a specified route. That might have slowed our progress along the course, but we probably noticed more things along the way than we



might have otherwise. We also came across two interesting fountains that made us smile. Our timing was a bit off, though, on another day, with the result that we got thoroughly soaked! We really enjoyed a nice hot chocolate when we got to the next cafe! (Hot chocolate in August???? Never!!!!) On the final night, after a bountifully catered BBQ, we sat up with two other couples until nearly midnight, gazing at the stars and spotting some of the satellites that cross the skies, apparently all the time. Never seen those before!



Even then the fun wasn't over, as a Dutch couple we've known for over 30 years invited us back to their house, giving us a rare couple of days to just chill out and do a bit of frog spotting in their pond (camera always at the ready!) The land around them has zillions of trees, along the roads and around the fields, yet still it was 'big sky' country, with a nearly 360 degree view and lots of blue sky! Their house is a typically large one in an area

where lots of farming has always been done. In times gone by, half the building was used for animals, feed and farming equipment, with the family living in the other half; nowadays it is divided for use as two dwellings, one currently housing a Ukrainian family. Jan has been very active in helping many such families who were placed in their area, because of the size of the houses, and he was able to tell us quite a lot about how they are getting on. If a 'Uki' family didn't get on very well in their first house, he would go out and organise someone else to take them. He is also helping them learn Dutch and get jobs and has rounded up enough bikes for their guest family to use. A close-knit community that works very well together! Very impressive!! There were some parallels with the *Kindertransport* story, though most of these families expected to return to their homeland.



An early September weekend in Shropshire was our final cycling outing for the year – a much-enjoyed opportunity to enjoy the company of fellow Flying Gate owners! Good routes, good food stops, lovely old hotel and lots of good chat. One of the rides took us to the rather well-kept ruins of Haughmond Abbey, somewhere we'd never been to before and not far from our base in Shrewsbury.

Eventually we tried to settle down to life at home with its usual stream of theatre work, Upper Hall management work and producing newsletters, though we tried to work in some evenings of live entertainment when we could.

We were treated to dinner and a superb live performance of *The Nutcracker* performed by the Birmingham Royal Ballet – a super night out! Thanks to our hosts, Pat has come to appreciate ballet as an art form a lot more this year. We enjoyed it so much that a week later we went to the screening of the same ballet by the London Royal Ballet – quite different but just as exhilarating!

We got through the year pretty much unscathed, but it wasn't all rosy. Most notably Britain lost its longest-serving, much loved monarch. She had been the Queen almost as long as we have been alive! Watching the impeccably organised proceedings of the day brought to mind, though, so many friends and neighbours we've also lost this year. Usually the count in one year is only one or two, but this year's list numbers over a dozen. Pat has just ended six weeks with her left leg in plaster, hobbling around on crutches, having hit the deck when her bike slipped in some mud and wet leaves in early November. Ironically we were going to a memorial gathering in the New Forest that weekend of a very long-standing friend, the designer of the StraussTours logo at the top of this report. With the help of some very good friends who also knew Danae, we still got there, but it made us more aware of the thin line between standing on two legs, standing on only one, and not being here at all.

Our Thanksgiving toast, thus, was to all those who have been so helpful to us during the year and our good fortune with health! We very much hope you are in as good shape and continue that way throughout the new year!!!

Pat & Mike

(Thanks to Mandy Adams for the photo of us at right.)

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More photos /larger versions) can be seen on www.flickr.com/photos/pscycycle/albums.
Annual reports are on www.strauss.org.uk. Printed copies happily sent out upon request.

