



The first thing we do when starting to write our annual letter is to gather up the monthly calendar sheets and scan through them. We can easily remember the main events that enhanced the year, but the details in between tell a story of their own, such as how few days there were each month when there was nothing written down reminding us that at least one of us had to do something, go somewhere or talk to someone about something! In short, they reminded us of all the little things that keep us from wasting away our lives by a cosy fireside.

We didn't count how many meetings there were, but they got us (well, mostly Pat) out of the house a fair amount, as did attending shows and duty managing at our local theatre (her second home!). Then there were talks to attend and 'sitting' sessions to work in. We both belong to our local U3A branch (University of the Third Age; where retired people go to learn something) and regularly attend their Local History meetings. Pat attends a French conversation group (not very high level!) and helps to run the Photography group and the Computer Support group. The latter has brought a new responsibility for her, the result of attending a meeting held to assess whether it would be viable to start such a group. There was some good support from people wanting help, but alas no one put their hand up to run it ... until her inner self said 'Can't let the others down'. She also took on setting up the sound and projection equipment for the monthly meetings of the main Ledbury U3A when the previous volunteer she had been helping moved away. Mike continued to be our domestic rock – keeping us fed, keeping our bank balance up, managing the building's finances and booking most of our travel arrangements. He also enjoys keeping up with the US stock market – the dividends from which provide most of our income!!

Early in February, as Pat was looking forward to getting some projects done around the house, she was handed the job of updating three local hand-drawn walking maps, ones she had worked on previously. Changes in land ownership and access points between fields meant the lines of some of the paths needed amending and sections of the descriptive text on the reverse side needed rewriting. All this had to be done, of course, in the same artistic style as the original work.



She'd barely got started on that project when she learned that funding had been obtained for the creation of two time-line story boards for Ledbury's Heritage Centre showing the history of the buildings on the west side of Ledbury's two main streets (one shown above). A few years ago she had produced the east sides, each a 1.5 meter wide panoramic view of all the shops, etc, with a list of all the occupiers/shopkeepers going back to 1900 or earlier listed below. Learning that producing the west sides was finally on the cards pleased her no end, but removing camera distortion from over 40 photos then seamlessly stitching them together into two strips and checking the colours of the buildings kept her glued to her computer until early April! They have, however, become the most viewed displays in the museum, so it was worth all the effort.

Woven into this time scale were: cycling down to Dymock and Kemble for their daffodil festivals in March and riding out to see several of the fields where the wild ones grow; enjoying a delightful Gala evening at the theatre to celebrate 25 years since the current building was opened; spending many hours planning and writing up the routes for our annual French camping tour; and attending an Easter weekend break in the Forest of Dean. At the latter, we decided to swap camping in our little tent for four nights in a heated wooden camping pod with a proper bed!! Getting old, or getting soft? Not sure which, but with rain on two of our three days there, it was a fortuitous move!

In early May we travelled up to Anglesey for our annual gathering of the Short Cranks (short women on small bikes). Good weather, lovely scenery and great company all week! Cycling up to the most northwestern point of the island was a challenge but we got a great view of the South Stack lighthouse and the rocks below, absolutely smothered with nesting birds! It also gave us the opportunity to connect with a chap who used to come on many of our camping tours, as well as a woman Pat worked with some years ago in

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researching the history of Ledbury. She took us on a lovely drive around the dramatic, rocky coastal scenery northwest of Llandudno. Two weeks later we were off for a week in Kent with the Tandem Club. More good company to while away some time with! Though poor weather did somewhat limit how much cycling we actually did, the many scenic lanes we rode along, counting oast houses we passed en route, helped get us ready for what came next.

From there we made our way to Dover for the Bike Bus pickup and thence to Provence for our annual French camping tour. Avignon's campsite treated us to a picturesque view across the river to the white-towered papal place and its famed bridge where people danced ...'sur le pont d'Avignon', and the town had plenty of ancient city walls and arcaded streets to explore. Arles gave us access to the Camargue in search of flamingos. We found a few, but were told that masses gather only when they are fed for the benefit of photographers... We never got to see Mont Ventoux in really clear skies but there were other good scenic views, from very jagged rocks jutting out of the ground to extensive fields of lavender. From Cavaillon we took advantage of a long, very well-made cycle track to reach the remarkable old hilltop village of Bonnieux with its extensive views over the landscape.

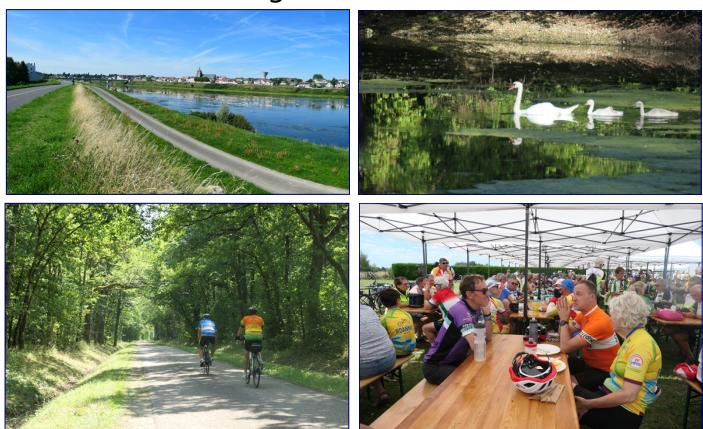


enjoyed two days of moving our chairs from the shade of one tree to the next! Though this was our third time in Provence, we were usually covering new ground, and fortunately the towns we stayed in or visited had not been spoiled over time by overtourism or overdevelopment.

Most of July was taken up with the usual run of things to do near home. The annual Poetry Festival went well, with some interesting poets staying with us, as did a photo exhibition Pat's U3A photography group put on at a local gallery. She enjoyed lots of very positive comments about her prints and even sold one! There was a lot of route planning and accommodation booking to do, with Mike tackling all our transport arrangements. By the last week, though, we were on the move again.

What followed could be a story all on its own, as we were away for six weeks – travelling through France, Belgium, Holland and North Yorkshire, from one organised cycling event to the next. We spent the first five days riding down to Orléans in the Loire Valley. We were not expecting to see anything special on this leg, but we were surprised at our first stop, Vimoutiers, to find a little museum dedicated to camembert cheese, one of our favourites. The museum was interesting, but the short video we watched, showing how a young farmer, Marie Harel, developed that cheese in the 1790s, was fascinating. She still stands proudly in the town centre even today!

Orléans was the base for this year's Semaine Fédérale, the huge French cycling gathering we attend each year. It is always a treat to be able to do as much or as little we want during this week, with no time restrictions or responsibilities! It was also relaxing to be



able to sit around on the warm evenings, chatting and sharing sangria with our neighbours around the campsite and taking advantage of the lunchtime feeding stations. The scenery wasn't spectacular, but we rode down some lovely canopy roads, and along the Loire itself there was lots to see including swans, canoeists and other cyclists.

Week three brought the start of our 'big adventure'. For the next nine days we cycled in a northeasterly direction through parts of France we'd never visited before, then into Belgium for three more days. Every day took us through a different landscape to a new destination. We'd

sent our camping kit on to our next 'event' and stayed in pre-booked AirB&Bs most nights, each one also a unique experience – sometimes in a room in someone's home, other times in rooms elsewhere on their property. The hospitality varied, but the hosts we met were ever so welcoming and helpful. Twice we were given use of the host's washing machine then dried our clothes in the warm, late afternoon sun. Another lady spoke only French but tried very hard to make us welcome and herself understood. One Dutch host couple chatted to us for maybe half an hour over cake and tea before showing us our room! On the nights when we had use of a microwave, we heated up something for dinner and spent a quiet evening 'in'.

Most of the towns where we stayed had nothing of particular note to see, though we'd planned our route to enjoy the scenery from quiet minor roads and riverside paths, not as a sightseeing tour. One we just happened across, though, was different. Rocroy still had most of its 17thC town walls, in excellent condition, laid out in a unique large radial star-shape. Their summer fete had taken over the town centre, making the place very jolly, so we spent an extended lunch hour people-watching and chatting with a family with three young boys, one of whom practiced his English on us.

From our third day on the road, and until we had passed through Belgium's



Ardennes region five days later, the terrain changed from fairly flat to fairly lumpy. The hills weren't tortuously steep, though our bikes' 'power-assist' motors did get put to work, but we were very happy when we got to the excellent cycle paths by the river Meuse, which became pretty much the standard from there onward. Our first stop in Belgium, Dinant, stood out for its dramatic position squeezed between the river and the sheer face of the hill behind it – an impressive sight from the opposite bank! The town claims to be the saxophone capital of the world, with brightly painted giant saxophones, maybe 10ft tall, placed along the bridge across the river. With no way to heat up food that evening, we treated ourselves to a slap-up sushi dinner.

Leaving Dinant we followed the river north, with one more overnight before reaching Liège. There were lots of barges plying the river between walls of bare rock stretching down to the water and a few small villages strung out almost two-dimensionally in the narrow space available. Perched at the top of some of the hills were large stone walls that must have protected look-out forts in a previous time,



and benches placed along the riverside provided very suitable places to admire the views while we munched our lunch. On one day we spent a delightful hour watching a group of youngsters trying to learn how to sail small boats. Much of the time they were trying to right the ones they had capsized!! But they got them up eventually.

The remaining distance to our next event, the International Tandem Rally, made it necessary to take a train from Liège into Holland, but it also gave us our second rest day for the whole tour. Good move!! A spacious fixed tent in the grounds of an AirB&B, a former farm, just outside Zutphen, provided a wonderfully relaxing spot to rest and recuperate from the daily moving-on routine we'd put ourselves through. Our hosts were wonderful, letting us do our laundry in their washing machine and giving us the right to roam all around the property, which we did. The tent was much larger than our own, having a large bed and a table inside plus enough head room for Mike to stand up straight. A table outside the tent was decorated with a colourfully striped cloth and a small vase of flowers, and a two-burner gas stove, under the shelter of the tent's porch, served us well, with pots and pans and all the crockery and cutlery one could want. On our two evenings we were brought wine and cheese and olives and clued up on the varieties of vegetables and the unusual sunflowers they were trying to grow. It was soooooo relaxing to be there!!



It was hard to leave, but we had a very nice half-day flat ride to the rally along tree-canopied roads and some of the ever-present canals. Over the years we've got to know so many of the people who attend this event, both British and Dutch, that we probably spent as much time socialising as riding – a rather good balance!



It was during this week that we made our one proper 'visit' of the tour – to Het Loo Palace, built for William and Mary, Dutch stadtholders who became King and Queen of England. Later it became the summer palace of the kings and queens of Holland. Indoors we admired the many rooms with painted ceilings, beds draped with rich fabrics, beautiful ceramics, ornate chandeliers and mirrors, then walked around part of the extensive grounds.

A grand fountain, with golden 'mermen' blowing water out of huge conch shells and Venus standing in a commanding position in the centre, added to the splendour of the garden, a large part of which was planted with low growing hedges ('parterres') laid out in patterns. On our final morning we rode over to the neighbouring town to watch a very entertaining parade – lots of creatively designed floats and very good marching bands, all of which we got to see twice due to the route they took.

We had enjoyed a peripatetic lifestyle, riding in a linear direction through changing landscapes that offered views that were more 'pleasant' than 'stunning'. We lost count at around 700 of how many fields of sunflowers and maize yet to be harvested that we passed, with even more fields of stubble, many of them populated with huge wind turbines, next to them. We'd cycled in each of these countries many times over the past nearly 50 years, yet each day felt like a journey into the unknown. Our distances had been planned to allow time to look at things, take in the ambience of an area and let our imaginations wonder about how the land and habitations might have looked many years ago before mechanisation crept in. The sky was nearly always blue with sunshine streaming down on us. With the exception of one day, we were also reasonably lucky on the technical front, having only one puncture to have to repair with, albeit one that took nearly two hours to deal with...! However, very early on we realised how many pieces of equipment we had that had to be charged up every night or so!



Five weeks down, one to go. From the rally we cycled to Deventer, took a train to The Hague, then rode to Delft for the night. Next day we cycled to the Europort for an overnight ferry to Hull, then via train and bike made our way to Malton in North Yorkshire for a night in a shepherd's hut before cycling to Northallerton (the last seven miles on a main road, in pouring rain!) for our third 'event', the annual Flying Gate weekend. Needless to say, the landscape and terrain were rather different from what we rode earlier in the tour, though quite enjoyable for that. Over the years we've come to know most of those who come, so the social side of the weekend was in full swing, and the three days of cycling in such scenic countryside put the cherry on our cake!



Much to our surprise, at the dinner on the final night, the award for something special relating to the event was awarded to us for having cycled veritably 1000 miles in getting there!!! A large 'silver' cup now graces our dining room table for the coming year. Although we were quite content with each other's company for most of those miles, the three events we attended gave us welcome opportunities to talk to others for a change!

At that point life returned to our usual mix of activities. No, we're not settling down for a long winter's nap, more trying not to take on any more than is already on our plates; maybe even a bit less. Pat has already managed to shed one of her tasks – a 16-page newsletter she had compiled, illustrated and printed twice a year for the past 20 years – when the focus of the historical society it was attached to shifted away from Ledbury. And she has gained three 'assistant-treasurers' who have taken on bits of her theatre work.

With the exception of losing two very good local friends to the all-too-familiar dreaded disease we all hope doesn't come our way, it has been a really good year. At our age we feel very lucky to have good health and physique and to have been able to do all we did. We hope you've had a good one as well and are looking forward to the year ahead. We haven't had many guests this year, so do feel free to come our way – for just a cuppa, or a light lunch, or maybe an indulgent overnight!

*Pat & Mike*

