

Andrézieux Bouthéon



15th -17th October 2005

Saturday 15th October

In the morning, a group from Soham Pumpkin Fair Committee left England for Andrézieux-Bouthéon. We were met at St. Etienne Airport by Georges Berne, Christian Thivolle and Zihar Dridi from the Office de Tourisme. They took us to the Hotel Actuel, where we unloaded our cases and were provided with refreshment, while being told the itinerary for the weekend.



Georges left us at this point to make further preparations for the Fete de la Courge the following day. Our first visit was to the Gorges de la Loire, where we climbed the tower of the Chateau d'Essalois to view the marvellous scenery of the Loire valley.



Later we moved on to the Barrage de Grangent, a dam built in 1959, which provides hydro electric power to the region.



On returning to Andreziéux-Bouthéon, Christian and Zihar pointed out several local facilities, including the swimming pool, the theatre, sports stadium, Hotel de Ville (town hall) and the Mayor's house.



At the Chateau de Bouthéon, final preparations were being made for the Fête de la Courge on the following day. We were only shown the 'potager' area. Here, some giant pumpkins waited to be judged, together with some of the children's best decorated pumpkins. There were also some magnificent floral displays including apples, gourds and of course, pumpkins.



That evening, we were driven to Le Poisson d'Argent, a local restaurant, where we sampled a fantastic traditional French meal. The courses included: tripe, fish soup with Coquilles St Jacques; a salad and meat platter, with Fois Gras, smoked salmon and a fish terrine; the main course consisted of duck in a delicious sauce, runner beans and a side dish of potatoes au gratin; there then followed a cheese course, a selection of delicious desserts and coffee. We also tried water and wine from the local area.



Sunday 16.10.05

We were collected by the Tourist Office Mini-bus the following morning, and were shown around the swimming pool or 'Piscine'. The site has numerous facilities: indoor and outdoor pools, flumes, Jacuzzis, saunas, Turkish baths and a multigym. A family of four could spend a morning or afternoon there for approximately €10. After this we returned to the area of the Le Poisson d'Argent restaurant and walked along the banks of the Loire river. Fishing is popular here, carp and pike are caught regularly. Mini-golf, a children's play area and a picnic area means this is a favourite place for families to spend their spare time.



Our journey to the Fête de la Courge took us past fishing ponds and fields containing poly-tunnels and pumpkins growing in situ. We arrived at the Chateau to witness a grower unloading an enormous pumpkin from the back of a van. A couple of our members volunteered to help carry the giant into the Potager area ready for judging later in the day.



During the morning we walked among stalls which displayed the wares of local retailers. We were able to sample pancakes, breads, pastries, jams etc. made from produce such as pumpkins, marrows, chestnuts, apples, melons and walnuts – a very gastronomic experience.



At midday, 300 people, including the mayor, local dignitaries and the contingent from Soham Town Council and Soham Pumpkin Fair Committee sat down to 'Autumn's Lunch': Roast Pork with a leek quiche; Monts du Forez cheese and an apricot pastry for dessert. Speeches followed: the Mayor, Jean- Claude Schalk, Mark Williams, chairman of Soham Pumpkin Fair and Rosemary Aitcheson, Chair person of Soham Town Council all expressed their goodwill with the hope for the signing of the twinning to go ahead next spring. Presentations of floral displays (created by Paul Cooper) were made to the Mayor's wife, Michèle Schalk, and to his personal assistant, Michèle Maras. The meal came to a close with Soham Town Council members leaving to return to England and Mark Williams re-affirming his promise to allow the people of Andrézieux-Bouthéon to meet Mr Pumpkin.



During the afternoon, our large round orange character met several French children (some of whom were not sure what to make of him!), bantered with other local celebrities and posed for photos by the local media (newspaper and television). He seemed to be very popular with both young and old and this was confirmed by Georges later.



The remainder of the afternoon was spent enjoying the park adjoining the chateau. A koi carp pond, various bird and animal enclosures have recently been opened to encourage the public to visit. In fact, this year's attendance at the Fête has increased from 5 000 to 10 000.

Finally when the grounds had cleared everyone involved with the organisation of the event sat down to an informal meal, content in the knowledge that the day had been ‘a job well done.’

Monday 17th October

On Monday morning, Georges and Zihar took us to St Galmier, a nearby town which is famous for its spring water. Here we met Estelle from their tourist office-she gave us a guided tour of the town, including a look at the Badoit sparkling mineral water plant, the historical old town area and a trip to the top of the Catholic church to give us a wonderful panoramic view of the area. Our tour culminated in a visit to the local glass blower. He gave us a tremendous insight into this amazing craft.



We said goodbye to Zihar , and went on to a restaurant called C.A.S.A in Andrésieux-Bouthéon. Georges, Christian and his wife treated us to lunch before we left for St Etienne Airport.



We all had a marvellous time, and were really honoured to have been given such generous hospitality. The official signing of the jumelage (twinning) document is next spring and we are really looking forward to many more meetings with our new friends and associates.

