

Three go mad in France

Or

How to export beer the hard way

Being the true and varied adventures of one half of the Soham delegation that attended the Fête des Bords de Loire in Andrézieux-Bouthéon on the occasion of the signing of the twinning charter between that town and the town of Chiusi in Italy. My original plan was to complete this diary daily every night, but I only managed this on day one – the remaining days were just packed with events that I was in no condition to record them at bedtime. I only hope that my memory serves me well over the few days that have passed. If, gentle reader, I have made any mistakes, errors or omissions in this journal with items in which I was personally involved, please inform me via the usual channels before contacting your solicitor.....

Day 1 – Thursday 28th June 2007.

8am, the day has started warm and sunny. My alarm has sounded its usual 6am wake-up, but today I ignore it as today the great Soham Pub Adventure begins. Our twin town of Andrézieux-Bouthéon will be holding their annual fair this weekend, and they have invited us to create an English pub, with English beer, darts and dominoes. At the last minute I have to arrange some finances via Internet banking for conversion to Euros, and also print out some maps of tonight's stopover – the suspiciously named 'Mr Bed' at Reims-Tinqueux. Suddenly Steve Frost is here – driver and the other barman of our pub. First things being first, we loaded two firkins (80 litres – **EIGHTY** litres) of Fenland Brewery's Osier Cutter bitter into the back of his 4x4, then fit all of the luggage (why does Anne need twice as much as me? Is it something to do with being chairman of the twinning committee?) around it in an attempt to maintain its temperature and condition.

We made good time down to Dover, and although we were selected by the officials to be pulled into 'The Shed', we were only subjected to questioning and the truck and its trailer remained packed. They were quite amused by the idea of us taking English beer to France. They waved us on, and we made easy work of the queue for the boat with a DVD of 'The Dukes of Hazard', which managed a perfectly timed YEE-HAH! as we were waved on board the boat. By 12.30 we were sat in Window seats of the bar with drinks. After a perfect crossing we were on the A26 autoroute out of Calais, headed for Reims. We made good progress through several changes of weather, before arriving at Mr Bed just before 6pm local time. It was a basic hostelry, but I thought that it looked better than the pictures on the French hotel internet site led you to believe. The parking spaces are not 4x4 + trailer friendly, so we parked sideways across about six of them. It doesn't look like they'll be needed tonight however.

A brief pit-stop in our rooms to install the necessities for the night, and we went out to explore the town of Tinqueux. The part that we are in has a cement plant and a collection of 'out of centre' businesses (hotels, diners, shopping centres etc.). Just across the road from Mr Bed is a garden centre, where Steve picks up a selection of seeds for next year's pumpkins and Anne finds some seeds for vegetable varieties not

usually seen in England. Just down the road a little, we find a garage selling American Cars – Steve is taken by the Mustang GTO, but I like the Corvette Stingray. Neither is must use at hauling beer to France however.

After a fruitless search for Le Creuset pans in a shopping centre where Steve bought himself a very small welder that he had never expected to see, we had dinner at Flunch (nice name eh?). Anne had salad, fish and fruit salad, Steve had Steak and chips and I had andouillette and chips. Curiously enough, the last time that I was in Reims (Wednesday 9th August 2000) I had andouillette also. It's a delicious sausage, but I have a sneaking suspicion that I do not want to know what is in it. This time, Steve and I took our first opportunity to have cheese for desert. The way that service works at Flunch is that you select your starter/desert/drinks and take them to the till on a tray, where you name your main course and pay for everything. You are then given a ticket that you take to the grill where your main course is prepared in front of you. You then take this to a separate area where you then select vegetables and sauces as required. I was quite restrained with the chips, but noticed the locals leaving with towering platefuls, or even returning to the veggies with empty plates!

After a brief 'discussion' about what time 'early' was in relation to breakfast, we turned in at 10pm for a good start in the morning.

Day 2 – Friday 29th June 2007.

Steve and Anne had negotiated between them that 7.30am was an acceptable time for breakfast; although Steve still insisted that 'half the day will be gone'. I was happy as this meant that I got up at 6.30am, which is fairly close to my usual schedule. Our room had a double bed and a bunk above it, the head of the double and one side of the bunk being up against the same wall. A cunning means of sleeping three in a room where I suspect that the floor area was about the same size as that of a double and a single bed together. Steve had his own room; he did not use the bunk in ours! The toilet/shower room occupied a space diagonally across one corner of the room. I've been in bigger spaces that were just showers, but it all seemed to work. The one-inch shower tray was quickly overwhelmed by the poor performance of the drain in the shower, and I had to wipe up the floodwaters ready for Anne to repeat the whole performance.

7.30 was probably the best time that we could have chosen for breakfast, as we were able to pick a table and select our breakfast from the buffet before what seemed to be the whole of France descended at 7.45am for their petit dejeuner. Breakfast was typical continental (croissants, jam, juice etc.). It only took Anne two attempts how to get a cup of lemon tea out of the machine before she decided that she'd over-sweetened it and didn't drink it anyway.

Breakfast completed, we gathered up our possessions, dropped the keycards at reception, threw everything into the back of the truck and we were off again. Initially we had a little difficulty finding the correct way to get onto the A26 so that we were southbound again, but we were soon on our way again through the centre of the town with the cathedral peering through the trees on our left side. French autoroutes are of excellent quality, and the traffic density is quite light. With a maximum speed of 130 kmh (about 80mph), we flew south, with the scenery constantly changing around us; always keeping in the lane marked 'Lyon', only stopping for gazole (diesel) or the peage (toll) kiosks to pay for the road we had just covered. At the first stop for diesel that we made, for an additional two euros we were able to buy Anne an electronic sudoku game. I think that it cheats because just as Anne is getting close to solving the

puzzle it throws an electronic wobbly and she has to start again. I think it's a battery thing and a little work with a screwdriver should sort it out... Steve and I spotted many hawks, buzzards and kestrels hunting in the fields by the autoroute, and on one occasion an entire field of hemp, or "Ganja!" as Steve announced it. We didn't bother harvesting any, as you would need to smoke the entire field to get any sort of a buzz, this crop being grown for rope making rather than pleasure.

Before long we were entering the outskirts of Lyon, then we were crossing the Rhone, then we were driving alongside the huge river in the centre of the city. The map was of little use at this point, as the traffic (on our side of the dual carriageway at least, the northbound side was nose-to-tail) was flowing rapidly and we were flowing rapidly with it. I knew that we needed to head out Southwest to St. Etienne, but the road signs seemed to offer directions to everywhere except St. Etienne. Therefore, taking the opinion that if we were going to get lost, we might as well get lost scenically, I sent us along the river and eventually the hoped-for sign appeared for the A47.

Anne had promised Martine (her counterpart in France) that she would ring when we reached St. Etienne, but although contact was established, Martine didn't appear to be able to hear Anne, and from the noise on the phone it sounded like her phone was being rummaged around in her handbag. By the time that we had eventually established two-way contact, we had actually left the A47, and were parked on the outskirts of Andrézieux-Bouthéon. Martine gave us directions to the Tourist Office in the centre of town, using the marvellously decorated roundabouts as landmarks in much the same way as we use pubs in England (straight on at the aeroplane, left at the machines etc.). We did have a problem with the 'puffin' roundabout, but this in fact turned out to be the 'dauphin' (dolphin) roundabout. Steve was disappointed to see that the garden gnome that was sharing the cockpit of the biplane on the aeroplane roundabout on his last visit had since been removed. Anne is still convinced that Steve was somehow responsible for the gnome appearing there in the first place. Steve continues to protest his innocence.

Soon after arriving at the Tourist Office, Martine arrived to meet us, followed in swift succession by our hosts Hervé and Michelle Wauquiez, who live a short way away in the neighbouring village of Veauche. Michelle, having a little English joined us in our vehicle, and we drove to their beautiful house a short way off of the main road through Veauche. We disconnected the trailer and parked it on the lawn before joining our hosts in their back garden for drinks by the pool. Anne, having brought her costume couldn't resist a dip, and Hervé kindly opened the covers and switched on the water jet for Anne to try and fool us that she was actually swimming instead of walking.

We had (as the two Ronnies once said) a packed programme tonight, so we only had time for a brief rest before we were off out to the site of the Fête des Bords de Loire for a talent show with appearances by top Patrick Sébastien and Dalida impersonators. First we were able to see the site for our pub, have a glass or two of sangria, meet up again with old acquaintances from previous twinning events and be reunited with those members of the Soham party (Peter Beer, John and Rosemary Aitchison and Graham Steward – Barbara Beer was unfortunately feeling too unwell to travel). Then we were summoned to take our seats in the huge circus marquee that had been erected nearby where we were to be entertained by 'Le Spectacle des Sosies' At first it seemed peculiar to be sitting in the middle and looking at a stage on the side, but once Pinou (Patrick Sébastien) had bounced onto the stage and introduced the event and the Jury, we were ready to be entertained.

There were eleven performers, singing in French and English at a very high standard. Anne was attempting to mark them herself to see whether she agreed with the judges, but there was no real doubt once Joanne came onto the stage and performed 'New York, New York' in the style of Liza Minelli – she was so good, in our opinion the fight was for second place. Anne's mark for her was 9.75 out of 10, but she refused to comment on how she had lost that 0.25 of a mark. Joanne was the girl who managed to leave her passport on the aircraft when visiting Soham, which I suppose demonstrates how heavily weighted her talents are on the artistic side! The Mayor presented her with her prize and we were treated to a repeat performance of her song.

After 'Les Talents des Bords de Loire', Pinou came on and gave us some of the songs that made Patrick Sébastien famous, and having seen the real man on TV5, I can vouch for his impersonator being very good indeed. For his song 'Tourner Les Serviettes' (wave your handkerchiefs) he encouraged us to sing the chorus and wave our handkerchiefs, our bras our underpants etc. over our heads. So we did; me with my hat and Anne with the sleeve of her jacket. If you understand it, here is the lyric that we were all singing and waving to:

Et on fait tourner les serviettes
Comm' des petites girouettes
Ca nous fait du vent dans les couettes
C'est bête, c'est bête
Mais c'est bon pour la tête

At the end of the song, A man was brought up to the front of the stage clutching his daughter's bra that he had been waving. 'Patrick' felt the cup and announced it was a 94B!

After Pinou, we had the Dalida tribute, who consisted of a blonde woman in outrageously exotic dresses singing with five dancers. It was the kind of performance that we used to get on such shows as "Saturday Night Special" at 7pm on a Saturday on BBC1 back in the 80s. Consequently I wasn't able to appreciate much beyond the first two songs. Anne and Steve felt much the same way and when she announced that was the end of the first part, we and half of the audience took the opportunity to make a swift exit. This was obviously not an opinion shared by one besotted follower who came up to the stage after one song and asked for a kiss. Amazingly enough, although she was a little surprised by this, she crouched down and they kissed French style on both cheeks, although I noticed that he even exceeded the Belgian norm of three and managed a total of five before she got away.

Outside, the car park was full. There were cars parked on the side of the road, embedded with the driver's half of the car in the hedge. Cars were parked on the edges of people's drives, but we who had prime seats slap bang in the centre of the marquee were able to get out with no problem and find our way back to Hervé and Michelle's house in Veauche without recourse to the telephone for directions. Hervé and Michelle were away at another event, so we used their remote control keys to open the gates and the garage to get in. Every time that I did that, the sound of the Thunderbirds theme came to mind.

Our rooms were up in the converted attic (Hervé it seems is a very capable handyman), and we had a bathroom/shower for our exclusive use up there also. There was also a table-tennis table, and although the time was now 00.30, Anne and I played

until 01.30 before going to bed. Anne has a ferocious forehand topspin winner that had me searching behind the chimney or under the sofa for the ball many times.

Day 3 – Saturday 30th June 2007.

The day of the Fête. After our foolhardy effort with the table tennis the night before, it was close to 9am when we appeared for breakfast. Steve smugly declared that we had missed half of the day and that he and Michelle had already been and bought some bread and had breakfast. I asked whether we had kept him awake, but he described his ‘Selective hearing’ where he is a little deaf in one ear, so he keeps that ear on top and buries the good one in the pillow – result, very little disturbs him. I had bread, cheese and orange juice for breakfast, then went back upstairs and extracted Anne, who had managed to fall back to sleep.

Today, we were going to be split up. Anne would go with the other officials (John, Rosemary and Peter) to the Chateau, where the Andrézieux-Bouthéon/Chiusi twinning ceremony was to take place and a five-course dinner was to be served. Steve, Graham and I were to take part in the Fête des Bords de Loire itself – Graham performing in place of David Tickner’s school musical pieces that had unfortunately had to be scratched at the last minute, and Steve and I running “The Station”, Soham’s newest pub.

In its virgin state, the pub was a white plastic box tent, just the same as had been allocated to all of the other participants. First we raised the cross of St. George and the Union flag at one corner. This of course ensured the demise of any of the light wind that might have been lurking waiting to play with the flags. Next we put up the pub sign (The Station – appropriate for Soham don’t you think?) A wooden bar had been built for us, but we augmented this with the incredible flat-packing portable bar that Steve had created, conveniently locking the two together in a good solid construction. We decorated the interior of the tent with a bar scene that had been painted on Tesco value sheets (thank you very much for the discount Tesco). The result? Half an hour’s work and we had a pub! Steve described how the sheets had been painted by him and Jenny (and a young ‘un) over the course of two nights. When the sheets were lifted up from the floor when dry it was found that exactly the same design had been painted there by the paint soaking through! Fortunately the water-based paint mopped up easily. I mounted the dartboard on the huge piece of plywood that had been provided to protect the tent fabric from errant darts, screwing through the sheet to give the illusion that the board was actually mounted on the wall. Then, crisis! I’d left my darts in my case, and totally missed those that Anne had provided in the ‘Pub Décor’ case. Luckily, Hervé and Michelle were on hand, and expecting us to come back with them for lunch in any case. Steve declined and continued with the finishing touches of the décor (posters, toilet door signs, beer mats, table cloths, pub umbrellas etc.) while I returned, collected my darts and enjoyed a very pleasant meal with Hervé and Michelle (the strawberries with brown sugar were delicious!). Hervé seemed very disappointed when I declined the offer of a cognac after lunch, but I explained that what with the heat that day and the possibility of me drinking a few beers also, it probably wasn’t a good idea. Now I am left wondering whether it is the French who like a boozy lunch or they believe that the English do?!

Hervé delivered me back to the fête at 2pm. Steve had completed the décor in my absence – there were appropriate grouse pictures on the toilet doors, the bar had sprouted pump handles, the big table in front of the pub now had a table cloth and bar furniture such as towels, trays, beer mats etc had appeared. Furthermore, ten boxes of

Kettle Crisps of varying flavours had migrated from Norwich across the channel. I tried out the dartboard for size, and found it correctly set up. Steve chanced his arm for about the first time in 20 years and hit treble 20 with his first dart! A woman appeared and asked us if we wanted any plates, and we said “Yes please, two”, which meant that we had requested two packs of plates. We gave one back and set out plates of crisps on the tables. The final secret ingredient, two jars of pickled eggs, we kept out of sight behind the bar. Steve had been promised these free of charge if he could get photographic evidence of the Mayor eating one.

All was set. The beer was on the counter, broached and ready to pour, the entertainment for the day was just getting ready, which meant that Graham had been moved to the other side of the tent so that his un-amplified voice didn't have to compete with the PA that was making the announcements, the fish in the 'pond' across the other side of the site were installed and swimming about – unsuspecting of what was about to happen to them, the sun was shining – all we needed was some custom. At about this moment somebody passed me an apple drink. I wish I knew who that somebody was, as it was pure moonshine! The closest thing to pocheon that I have ever tasted without actually being pocheon. I took it as a very good omen for how things might unfold.

The idea was that all entrants to the fair were given a strip of five tickets. Each ticket was good for a free taste of each country's offerings at their stall. If you found that you liked that taste, you were able to buy more tickets that were good for a full sample. We were giving a taste of beer – the crisps and eggs were for free. Soon things were getting busy. My French was getting a testing discussing the flavour and type of beer with our clientele. The beer was popular, most people finding it fruity or flowery. In fact only one man didn't find it to his taste, and his friends who didn't share his point of view immediately set him upon. I calmed them all down by saying that it was quite all right not to like the beer as everybody has their own taste.

As the day wore on, we found that the approved sampling measure wasn't going to shift 144 pints of beer very quickly, so we surreptitiously upped the measure, to make the sample more worthwhile. A pair of municipal policemen stopped in front of the bar to watch the dancing going on on the specially constructed dance floor, and Steve dared me to offer them a beer. Well why not? The worst that could happen would be that I would be arrested... They were very good policemen, pointing to their badges to indicate that they were policemen on duty. Not that we were trying to turn their heads with much more than an inch in a small glass though!

At about 5pm, the official party returned from the chateau and changed into their working clothes (Soham Twinning Association T Shirts). John Aitchison overcame his lack of French to instruct and guide the locals in the playing of darts, assisted by Rosemary as and when required. Anne found all of the items that I had completely overlooked when setting things up, and also did a spell behind the bar to give Steve and I a chance to look around and see what the other countries were up to. Her first two 'samples' were full to the brim due to her lack of training with the tap on the beer barrel. We had some bread and cheese with the French, and another beer with the Germans, and watched the tile maker producing hand-made tiles before wondering back to be introduced to the Italians as Portuguese. “Bom Dias” said I, and got the reply “Buongiorno”. There went my chance to impress. I never heard a word of German on the German stall either. What a waste of my cosmopolitan ability with languages. Word had got around by now about how delicious the crisps on the Soham stand were, and suddenly we were mobbed by children and adults alike, all trying to get a sample of what must be very rare crisps indeed in France. Kettle Chips take

note: There is an untapped goldmine down there... In fact, I shook the hand of the gentleman who quietly asked for a beer while the rest of the world was demanding chips! For some time afterwards we were still turning folk away – “Les chips sont fin”. The kids soon found something else to occupy themselves with however, and we were passing out Tetleys beer mats to all and sundry. Apparently the attempt by the French youngsters to pronounce Tetleys on sight was quite amusing.

Things were starting to cool down a little now. We still had the odd flurry of activity, and the samples had now reached an all time high in their size as we attempted to empty at least one barrel. I myself had hardly drunk any, which was just as well as I had a great need of all of my French-speaking skills that afternoon. Finally the fête came to an end in the cool of the evening. We rang the bell and I bellowed “Time ladies and gentlemen please! Let’s be having your glasses” in time-honoured fashion. Immediately we set about striking the pub and re-packing it into the 4x4, which was parked behind it. Fortunately, a lot of the goods didn’t need to go back – the crisps for example. We unhooked the pub backcloth and bundled it up again before packing it into a plastic bag ready for the next occasion that a portable pub was required. As we were doing this, Martine came over and told us that we had the best stall on the fair. “That’s nice” we said, “Is there a prize?” Martine said no, but that might be a god idea for next time. Oh well, look out for next year – Steve has an idea for the same pub, but with yokels...

Whilst I was dismounting the dartboard, Steve passed me a fork and the last two pickled eggs. The French twinning party from the Chateau were sitting down to an afternoon tea, and the mayor was with them. I took them over to him, introduced them as an English delicacy and served one. At first I thought he might not eat it, but I insisted how much I enjoyed them, and lo and behold he ate it! That left one for me, so I ate that to prove I wasn’t having him on. Lovely.

When I returned to Steve with the empty jar he said that the tile maker had been asking after me, so I went over to say hello and had a pastis with them. Somehow the talk got round to swords and I said that I had been a 17th century re-enactor. He immediately produced a broadsword from his van, and I got to practice a few moves with it.

On returning to our pub, Steve had literally swept everything into his trailer and the back of the 4x4 and everything was ready to go. We did have a box of 12 bottles of Fenland Brewery beer to be given as presents to the host families at this point which seemed to disappear about now – we hope that it got through to the correct recipients. We went back to Veauche with Hervé and Michelle, where Michelle cooked a delicious meal of beef for us that Hervé accompanied with a 1995 Burgundy! Steve had given up drinking wine long before it became really popular, as he found the wine in Britain rather unpleasant, but he agreed that the pedigree of this particular wine showed through. I think we upset Hervé a little by once more turning down his offers of cognac or benedictine with his carefully prepared espresso (we both prepare the meal – she does the food and I do the coffee), but we were tired and there was no chance of a game of table-tennis before bed tonight.

Day 4 – Sunday 1st July 2007.

This morning I think I actually woke up before Steve. I let him get ready and go downstairs first though. A quick shower later, and I was down in time to go out with Steve and Michelle to collect the bread in Michelle’s preferred boulangerie in the centre of Veauche. We walked past the Marie with its new car park and seating areas,

then down to the shops where a terrace overlooked the Loire valley. A small bridge led from here over the road with a gloriously green view of fields and trees. We called at the shop, and Michelle collected her bread (and a croissant on request from Anne), then instead of walking back the way that we came, we walked on to get a view of the Loire and visited the old washhouse where people used to go and wash their clothes in public and beat the hell out of them on the stones there. Michelle led us back through little alleys to the main road, where we quickly got back to the house. I roused Anne and we all had some breakfast before Steve and I helped Hervé to erect his new gazebo – a rather fancy affair that screwed down onto his decking by the pool and opened and closed with a handle that wound the roof open and closed.

We had an appointment for lunch at the site of the fair at about 12:45, so for amusement before then, Hervé and Michelle suggested that we visit nearby St. Galmier as there was an art exhibition taking place on the streets. We all went in Hervé's Citroen, as the 4x4 was all packed and the trailer also packed and attached. St. Galmier is only a short distance from Veauche, and lies opposite Chamboeuf, which is the home of our friend Coralie, who came to Soham to work at the Soham Lodge Motel and stayed with us while she did so. It is also the home of the Badoit mineral water, and the locals are allowed to come and collect containers of the water direct from the spring every so often. Steve said that it is rather chalky and metallic – an acquired taste then. We walked up through the cobbled streets to the church where a service could be heard in progress inside. Steve described how the ascent of the bell-tower the previous year had given him a fantastic view but destroyed his leg for the rest of the day because of an old injury to his left knee.

Soon we were up and down the narrow cobbled streets amongst art that ranged from picturesque to erotic via incomprehensible. We didn't buy any art, but we did take the opportunity to buy gifts for those back home. It was a warm day, and the streets were taking their toll on Steve's leg once more. Finally we came to a point where Steve said that he had to stop and that he would meet the car there when we drove past. I had leg injuries of my own that were starting to remind me that they had happened, so I took the opportunity to rest too and kept Steve company. Hervé's Citroen soon appeared, and we were whisked back to Les Bords de Loire for lunch. I could see that a barbecue had been started when I got out of the car, but I was not prepared for the amount and variety of food that had been prepared. I needed three plates (and as many hands) to transport the different meats and salads back to my place at the table with a mixed party of English and French people. Although we had left the beer for whatever celebrations may have been taking place on Saturday night, there was still plenty left in the 1st barrel, and even after having drunk a few with our lunch, we were still able to pour out 7 or 8 litres into emptied mineral water bottles that we gave to Martine for distribution. The untapped barrel was stowed away in Hervé's car.

After lunch we said our goodbyes. The Mayor said (unusually) in English, "Thank you Roy for your egg. It was delicious!" I saw Francois (who visited us in Soham) and pulled his leg about wearing sandals and socks. All of the women with him seemed to agree with me. Steve thinks he managed to swing a pair of Andrézieux-Bouthéon shirts from the man who he met at the Soham pumpkin fair last year. We had had a great time, met wonderful people and had had such kind and generous hosts. Anne and I are very keen on returning in October for the Fête des Courges.

Hervé drove us all back to Veauche, where we said our goodbyes to him and Michelle, having swapped our email addresses. Our plan was to drive as long as we felt comfortable, then find a motel or cheap hotel where we could stop for a night so as to make the journey on Monday easier. We headed out of Andrézieux-Bouthéon;

back onto the A47 and into Lyon. The bright sunshine soon disappeared, and we could see strikes of lightning around us. Once more, the road signs in Lyon left a little to be desired, and as we drove along the Rhone there was nothing that we could see that would lead us to the A26 and a route out northwards. Eventually, as we left the Rhone and crossed railway lines, I noticed a sign for Lyon St. Exupery (the airport) and I directed Steve that way in the hope that we could pick up the other autoroute that leaves the North of Lyon and joins the A26 a short way along. Bingo! There it was – we'd escaped Lyon again. From here the rain began to fall, and whilst we were making our way along the A5 in the direction of Troyes we decided that we might as well cut off to the small town of Chaumont sooner rather than wait until we arrived in Troyes later. On arrival in Chaumont, things looked promising. A huge railway viaduct crossed the road (for those of you that know Ribbleshead viaduct, the Chaumont one is 22m higher and 200m longer), and was soon followed by a rush of signs promising accommodation. As we climbed out of the valley we passed a huge sign on the wall proclaiming "MOTEL", so we stopped and I quickly ran (it was still raining) down the steeply sloped drive (almost a river in places) to see whether they were a) open and b) not full. The lonely car in the car park pretty much said it all, and the Vacancies sign on the door confirmed it. The prices (£51 for a double, £44 for a single) were good, so we turned around, drove down and booked in. Whilst waiting for the others to get their gear out of the back of the 4x4, I made friends with the cat. He appeared to be an outdoor cat, and seemed to appreciate a fuss. After we had booked in and we were walking back to our rooms, there was a BANG! And he was standing on his back paws with his front paws up against the glass of the front door. He wasn't allowed in, and didn't appear to want to come in, but I think he liked the company. The gentleman on reception was rather jolly and apologised for the rain, it being the worst summer that he could remember. We said not to worry, we were English and used to it. Unfortunately it being a Sunday there were no staff to prepare any food, so we had to go back out in the drizzle to see what the town had to offer. Steve found Anne three tiny frogs on the path back up to the main road.

It was indeed about 500m (as promised) before we arrived in the town centre, and the numbers of restaurants rather than their names were advised on the road sign at the roundabout. We didn't fancy the station buffet, and decided to try one of the others. On the way we took a look at the view over by the Chateau, once the seat of the Counts of Champagne, and that to the church over the red roofs of the town. Just as we went to cross by the roundabout, a car came round it sideways and completed a full 180-degree spin, much to the surprise of the young lady driving it. Steve very kindly observed that the rain must have made the road slippery at that point.

Our hunger overcoming our need to stand out in the weather we looked at the menu advertised in the window of the restaurant of the nearby "Hotel des Remparts", and found that the £27 menu looked tasty and very good value. We went in and got a seat with a good view of the roundabout, where we could see a few other cars surprised (but not to such a great degree) by the slippery spot. Steve and I had a tasty local beer called Choue while we studied the menu, and Anne had a Campari & Orange. We ordered our meals and in no time an 'Amuse Bouche' (mouth pleaser) appeared. This was a tiny dish containing a snail and various other ingredients in a white sauce. Steve asked, "Are you going to get me eating snail?" and we agreed. I have to say it wasn't very tasty, but that wasn't the snail's fault, there were just too many tastes in that little sample. The remaining courses were delicious however, and we even found Steve another wine that he liked – a Bergerac Rosé.

The meal over, we paid up and left. As soon as we were out, the lights went off and the restaurant was closed. We weren't the only diners there, but we were certainly the last! As we walked back in the dark, it came on with more rain, but not too heavy. As soon as we got back to the motel we went straight to bed. Anne tried to watch an English black and white film on TV, but failed quite easily. Steve slept with his window open, bothered by the noise of the frogs outside until he turned his selective hearing on them...

Day 5 – Monday 2nd July 2007.

After what was to me a quiet night, we got up and took the usual continental breakfast in the bar/dining room/conference room that overlooked the paddock and woods at the back of the motel to the side of the viaduct. It was an impressive room for breakfast, and Steve rather liked their decorated mirrors advertising spirits. He said that they were of good quality.

We paid our bill, and with the good wishes of the rather jolly owner/manager behind us, we climbed back up the hill and onto the road again. We had thought that we'd look at the town a little more, but the parking was difficult, and the shops (as appears to be mostly the case on a Monday morning) were mostly closed. Even the post office had a half-holiday on a Monday, so we abandoned any plans that we had for Chaumont and set off in the direction of Troyes. Well that was the plan... The Chaumont one-way system had the last laugh as it directed us all of the way around the town, back across the 'dodgy' roundabout, and back past the motel again. We had decided to take a break from the autoroute in order that we could see a little bit more of France close up at lower speed and also that Anne could post the mail that she had for her father. Juzennecourt was the first village of any size out of Chaumont on the N19, and luckily the post office there didn't share the same opening hours of those at Chaumont. Letters posted, we carried on in a Northwesterly direction through occasional rain. Although the roads were quiet, we were able to detect the difference in the quality of the road surface as we were bounced about significantly more on this N road. So much more in fact that just to the North of Troyes we returned to the autoroute for the remainder of our journey, and filled the time with ideas for a Soham Twinning Association stand at the Soham Pumpkin fair, a Soham Twinning Association website, and how we could go back in October for the French Fête des Courges.

Our plan was to cross over into Belgium to do some shopping before returning home, so I navigated us towards Dunkirk from where we would pick up the A16 to De Panne, where the shops known as Tobacco Road were to be found. Dunkirk we found easily enough, but the junction with the A16 somehow lead us through the back streets of an industrial zone before joining the autoroute. We didn't appear to be the only people getting caught like this either, so I don't think it was our route finding (probably more likely to be French road signs). The Belgian border was a mere formality (crossed at about 70mph), and we were able to load up with all of those goods where the duty on the continent is less (booze and tobacco). We got back onto the A16 (easier when going to Calais) and headed for the port. Our boat sailed at 7.30pm, so we still had some shopping time, so we pulled up at the large Metro store just outside Calais. We were pleasantly surprised with the goods to be found there (1/2 a case of champagne for E10 anybody?) and we had quickly picked up a nice little collection of bargains. However this all came to nothing when we were asked for our Metro cards at the checkout and we had to go and put it all back. It's just as well

that we didn't take the 2ft long lobster that the man fished out of the tank for us. Never mind at least it was some money that I didn't have to spend.

The port was very near and we were close to boarding time, but Steve had to open up the trailer and the back of the truck to demonstrate that we were hiding nobody on board. We were given the all clear with about five minutes to go, leaving Steve with all of the locks and straps on the trailer still to secure. We were loaded well to the back of the queue however, and in the end there was no rush.

Once on board we headed up to the restaurant for something to eat and a window seat, but the restaurant appeared to be mid-way through a refit. So we settled for the same seating in the bar with a bar snack instead. Our efforts to order 5 croque monsieurs (cheese and ham toasties) from the barman (nationality unknown) ranked amongst some of the finest scenes from Fawlty Towers. Initially while the croque monsieurs were warming in the microwave, we were given five sets of knives and forks. I took some of these over to our table, but on my return, the barman had obstinately made them up to five sets again, as Steve, myself and the man behind us in the queue had managed to convince the barman that we actually wanted five croque monsieurs but only three drinks. The look of disbelief on the man's face when Steve handed back all of the extra cutlery was so funny that I had to walk away before I exploded with laughter at the bar. A shame really that we went to all of that trouble, because the food itself was very average and only served to fill a gap. Steve and Anne were actually rather ill later that evening, and the shipboard food was the main suspect. I was congratulated on my "cast iron guts".

The voyage back was rather rougher than the outward crossing, but there was nothing significant to delay us, and we were soon rolling down the ramp and back into Dover. England hadn't made the effort to welcome us home, and things were grey and damp all of the way back to Soham, where some of us (unlucky Steve) had been able to take Tuesday off work.

Looking back we all had a great time thanks to the kindness and hospitality of the people of Andrézieux-Bouthéon. We augmented this by having driven down to the Loire and making an adventure out of the journey also instead of having to use the cattle transport that is air travel. We can recommend the motel by the viaduct in Chaumont as a good place to stop halfway for anybody that wants to do a two-part journey like we did, but most of all we recommend that people make the effort and go and visit!