

## A Twinner's Diary

Forty-four years; the length of time the "Society of Friends of Montargis" has been organising visits to Crowborough's twin town in the Gatinais region of France. In April this year, the Montargois stayed with their host families in Crowborough. September saw Crowborough 'Friends' visiting France.

Departing early on the morning of Thursday, 2<sup>nd</sup> September, the "Society of Friends of Montargis" travelled by coach, arriving at 6pm French time to a small welcome reception at a Gymnase (secondary school) in Montargis. Most society members have been staying with their host families for many years; very many years in some cases! For new travellers it can be like a blind date as they meet their host family for the first time.

Each exchange itinerary includes both prearranged events and time to spend with the host families. On Friday morning, the first prearranged event was a visit to a small artisan bakery, set in a picturesque location in the French countryside. After viewing the bakery, a chance to knead some dough (with results that were reminiscent of "The Generation Game"), and a walk around the farm, lunch was provided at a nearby restaurant. Food and drink play a major role during exchange visits – it is France, after all – and good food and wine are plentiful.

Montargis is a town of about twenty-thousand inhabitants, much like Crowborough, but it is the main conurbation in the Gatinais region, so enjoys facilities suitable for a population of seventy-thousand. A huge new library built in a very modern style (not a right-angle to be seen, and no bricks either!), an eighteenth-century four-story Town Hall, several large schools, and an enormous rail station can all be found in the town.

After lunch, a visit to the Bourdelle museum provided a little local culture. Laid out as a garden designed to accentuate the art, the open air museum displays some of the most important of Antoine Bourdelle's sculptures, ranging from small busts to the larger-than-life-size bronze of Argentine Admiral Alvear atop his horse.

Later that day, Crowborough's mayor attended a reception with the mayor of Montargis and the regional Member of Parliament. For other visitors, the evening was available for taking in the Caravane de Loire, a bi-annual spectacle that stages shows and displays in and around the Loire valley and at nearby towns.

In Montargis, several roads had been closed for the Caravane de Loire carnival procession, and space had been cleared for the dramatic show and fireworks at the end of the evening. Comprising acrobatic stilt walkers, gymnastic monkeys, a diabolical compère, a moto-cross rider, and earth-shaking music, the show deserved to be described as a spectacle. Following it, the fireworks were equally extraordinary. Judging by the amount of charred cardboard and spent fuses falling amongst the crowd, the fireworks were not only lavish, but were shown as close as possible to the spectators!

For some, Saturday began with an early visit to the Montargis market. For others getting off to a more leisurely start to the weekend, Saturday began with the formal reception, held at the Town Hall for members of both Montargis and Crowborough twinning societies. These events are an opportunity to watch representatives from the societies deliver short speeches in a language that is not their native tongue. Contrary to popular belief, the French speak English no better than the English speak French.....

For the rest of Saturday, visitors had another opportunity to see more of the Caravane de Loire, to go out with their hosts, or simply to have a walk around Montargis. Less famous – in England, at least – than Sherlock Holmes and Arthur Conan-Doyle is the artist Ann-Louis Girodet Triosan, born in Montargis in 1767. At the Musée Girodet the works of Girodet can be viewed, along with pieces by the sculptor Triqueti. There is also a Roman Catholic church with stained glass windows that are worth seeing, plenty of retail therapy for those so inclined (including the extraordinary praline boutique), and lots of walks alongside the town's waterways. There are so many stretches of water and bridges crossing them that Montargis is known as the "Venis de Gatinais". Its streets

are also so extensively adorned with flowers that it is referred to as a "Ville Fleurie".

Sunday morning was available to stay in bed until late, go out again with hosts, or have a leisurely breakfast, before a huge lunch for the two twinning societies. The twinning society visits are definitely unsuitable for anybody on a low calorie diet!

After forty-four years, the twinning societies of both towns are still going strong and building long term friendships between the people of Crowborough and Montargis. Visits are an opportunity to regularly spend time in a similar, but subtly different, culture, and to practise that rusty old 'O' level French!

Travelling back to Montargis with us this year was a young French student who had taken the opportunity to gain work experience here in Crowborough. Staying with several of the twinning society members, she was able to spend time experiencing work in England and improving her English.

Each year the mayors of Crowborough and Montargis represent their respective towns and town councils during the visits. Both towns take considerable pride in the warm welcome they give their visitors and the facilities and culture they introduce them to.

Everybody is welcome to join the "Society of Friends of Montargis". You will have the chance to stay with a French host family in or near Montargis, and they will be able to stay with you here in Crowborough. There is a small annual membership fee which contributes towards some of the activities for the French guests when they visit. Twinning Society visits usually take place near Easter and at the end of summer.

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