

## **Normandy and Calvados Country 20<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> May 2013**

Early, on the damp morning of Monday 20<sup>th</sup> May, 23 intrepid souls, under the watchful eye of group organizer Denise Bowerman, set out on a five day tour to Normandy and Calvados country. After a long coach drive, in fairly heavy rain, all were relieved to arrive safely at the centrally located Grand Hotel de l'Esperance at Lisieux which was the ideal base for the 4 days devoted to exploring the surrounding area. Lisieux is a charming town located in the middle of the Calvados department of the Basse-Normandie region and is the capital of the Pays d'Auge area.

The reasons for the enthusiasm of the U3A group varied considerably and reflected the diversity of the area. At the top of most people "must see" places was the Bayeux Tapestry, but there were a variety of other reasons. For some it was their interest in Calvados, for others it was to visit, or re-visit the delights of Honfleur and Caen. There were the Chateaux and their gardens to explore and some travellers were just happy to admire the scope of local architecture, especially the half timbered houses with their characteristic pink tile infilling.

Tuesday, the first full day of exploration was firstly to the Chateau du Breuil world famous for its Calvados produced by distillation of its own cider made from apples from the Pays d'Auge. The group was shown how the Calvados is aged in oak barrels, for a minimum of 4 years to typically up to 15 years, and of course there was an opportunity to sample the noble liquid. Onwards then to the lovely village of Beuvron-en-Auge which is one of "Les Plus Beaux Villages de France". The village which is quite small has a central square surrounded by many houses with half timbered facades, some dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The first day ended with a visit to Chateau Vendevre, a fine example of an aristocratic country house. The chateau has extensive formal lawns and water gardens and houses a fine collection of miniature furniture.

Wednesday morning was a "free period" which enabled the group to explore Lisieux at leisure and the majority found themselves drawn to the splendid Basilique de Sainte-Thérèse de Lisieux. The Basilica is relatively new, formally blessed in 1937, and is a fine modern example of a Roman-Byzantine style church; there are relatively few internal supporting columns which result in unobstructed views the length of the church. One of the features of the church is the use of intricate mosaics which not only provide religious decoration but which reflect light to make the interior glow. The church attracts visitors and pilgrims alike and is second only to Lourdes in terms of pilgrimage. Then on to Caen, the capital of the Basse-Normandie region, famous for both its old history, being the burial place of William the Conqueror, and more recent history, being associated with the Normandy landing of 1944. The day culminated in a visit to see the Bayeux Tapestry which is truly stunning, some 68 metres long and 0.5 metres high. It is often seen on television but nothing quite prepares you for the real thing and it comes as a surprise to learn that the Tapestry embroidery was probably done in England. It is quite amazing how a number of the 72 scenes manage to convey a sense of movement and how, considering only 8 different colours were used, a sense of depth is achieved. Although the story told and depicted by the tapestry is well known it is fascinating to see how the story unfolds. Several members of the group recognized that a copy of scenes 1 and 2 of the Tapestry can be found at Bosham church; Harold sailed from Bosham in 1064 to meet William.

Off to Honfleur on Thursday. Fortunately the sun came out and the group was able to enjoy the warmth whilst enjoying a coffee in one of the many cafes which surround the Le Vieux Basin. Being a magnet to yachts from the UK meant that Honfleur was familiar to a few hardy sailors in the U3A party. One of the many places of interest was Saint-Catherine's Church, still largely made of wood, but somewhat overshadowed by the houses that have encroached so close to it. After the initial sightseeing it was off to board the "Jolie France" for short cruise to see, close up, the civil engineering triumph of the Pont de Normandie. This bridge which links Honfleur with Le Havre is stunning, and

is some 2140 metres long, 215 metres high and has a span of 850 metres between the piers; truly amazing. In the afternoon the weather turned for the worse and the visit to Deauville was, to the relief of the group, modified to be a tour by coach. Thursday evening was an opportunity for the group to enjoy a memorable Normandy themed dinner at the La Ferme du Roy restaurant at Lisieux, excellent food and company was enjoyed by all.

Friday sadly the last day was cold and wet but it still allowed a visit to the Jardins de Valloires in the grounds of the 18th century Abbaye de Valloires, Picardy. Some 8 hectares of land were, between 1987 and 1989, turned into a botanical treat by the noted garden designer Gilles Clément, and include a number of different themed areas which harmonize with the abbey's west facade. There is a French garden, an English garden and a "Wild" garden each of which has specialized subdivisions. Unfortunately the weather once again cut short our visit, so off to Calais we went in search of bargains, in some cases alcoholic. We returned to Chichester at around 20.45.

All the U3A travellers were impressed by our driver Wayne, who had to contend with some awful weather and at times had to navigate tortuously narrow Normandy lanes and streets, often to the accompaniment of advice from backseat drivers. His driving was done with professionalism, patience and humour.

The tour itself was largely influenced by "Tailored Travel" but as far as the travellers were concerned the organizer and star of the show was Denise Bowerman who had put a huge amount of effort into planning, making certain that we saw the best places, and ensuring that the needs of the U3A were recognized and accommodated. During the holiday Denise regularly and comprehensively briefed the group as to the day's activities and everything ran like clockwork. Well done Denise and thank you for all your efforts and hard work; Ste-Thérèse de Lisieux would recognize your patience as Saintly.

**LD, Chichester** May 2013