

Rouen Chapitre and Mini Tour of Normandy - October 2013

By Ormond Smith

A party of ten members of Goustevin Scotland gathered in Rouen on Friday 18th October to take in the annual Chapitre in the home of the Confrerie and also to enjoy a three day visit to the Normandy region. Opting to drive out (allows for wine purchases!) were Connetable Nicol Manson with his wife Beverley and Bill and Sue Spence from Orkney, Bill picking up his new car on his way south. Taking the aerial route from Edinburgh were Freda Muir, Ormond Smith, Christina Cameron and Jean Slater, being joined by Edinburgh members Jim and Aurora Sibbet.

A fog bound Paris caused a two hour flight delay which would have a knock on effect at Rouen whereby our coach transfer was obliged to drop us off at the venue for the welcome party instead of being able to book into our hotel in the city and freshen up. Eh bien, c'est la vie!! The welcome party was at the Casino in Bonsecours, a suburb of Rouen with panoramic views over part of the city, the use of the venue being courtesy of the Mayor of Bonsecours, M. Laurent Grelaud. Members of the Confrerie in Rouen did the catering, a mouth watering selection of "amuse-bouches" and accompanied by a glass (or two!) of Pommeau, the age old Normandy concoction of Calvados and tannin rich freshly pressed apple juice.



The main course was "Canard a la Rouennaise", prepared in the traditional way, slow cooked and very rare, then finely carved before the carcass was put in the duck press and the juices extracted for the rich flambe'ed sauce. As an honour, our Connetable Nicol was invited to do the pressing of the carcass of the duck. The whole operation was overseen by M. Gerard Coudray, Maitre Canardier and Vice President of the International Order of Canardiers – needless to say the presented dish was both succulent and well

received and accompanied by a rather enjoyable 2007 Chateau Cantenac from St. Emilion. The evening concluded with a cheese course and naturally, a glass of Calvados as Jim played a selection of tunes on the bagpipes. A most pleasant evening to get our Norman adventure under way.

The following morning a fully robed Ormond and a kilted Jim joined members of the Grand Conseil in the Vieux Marche' to celebrate the "Fete du Ventre" or "Festival of the Stomach", the annual weekend long presentation of the agriculture of food, drink and produce of Normandy. Nicol had also planned to take part but with his back still giving him discomfort, he perhaps wisely opted not to take part in what was a long procession up and down the stalls and side streets of this interesting old quarter of the city, where Joan of Arc was burned at the stake. The procession commenced with accompaniment of a brass band but they gave up when Jim began playing a stirring "Scotland the Brave" on the pipes and followed up with a varied selection as the procession meandered its way around the stalls. After



photographs were taken, the assembled Confreries, of which there were a number, gathered in a hall to enjoy canapés and glasses of cider.

The evening saw the party head for the Salle Guillaume le Conquerant at Bois Guillaume on the northern outskirts of Rouen for the Chapitre to celebrate Guillaume le Conquerant, or William the Conqueror (www.royal.gov.uk) as we know him, who became William the 1st of England (but never Scotland!). The ceremony saw three Baron d'Honneurs inducted, Jean-Claude Lechanoine, the President of the Chamber of Commerce & Industry for Normandy, Dritan Tola, the Albanian Ambassador to France and Gilbert Renard, the Mayor of Bois Guillaume. The Gala Dinner was both creative and satisfying although the choice of a 2008 Echezeaux to accompany the Tournedos Rossini was disappointing as the wine was nowhere near maturity and proved to be very tannic and even bitter.

A relaxing mid morning departure was planned for the mini tour of Normandie and we sent off with usual coach driver Herve towards the delightful coastal town of Honfleur, on the south bank of the Seine estuary opposite the port of Le Havre. Lunch was enjoyed at "La Grenouille", a busy and popular bistro/restaurant on the waterfront, before we headed for a tour of this picturesque 16th century seaport, although now a fishing port and yachting harbour. The narrow streets are full of character and the old Saint Catherine church, built by shipwrights, is the largest wooden church with separate bell tower in France. Austere on the exterior, the interior is well lit by natural light and very restful.....but for a small orchestra rehearsing for a concert that evening – a rousing rendition of "Bohemian Rhapsody" on the Sabbath inside a church is certainly different! Having got "weel drookit" by the only shower of rain during the tour although temperatures were around 20C (most acceptable in October!), we headed west to the River Orne at Benouville near Caen – the site of the famous Pegasus Bridge (www.info@memorial-pegasus.org).



This was the vital bridge taken by British paratroopers early on D-Day, having landed silently by Horsa gliders in darkness (the first landed a mere 50 metres from the bridge!) and their arrival caught the German troops by complete surprise. The paras were re-enforced by the arrival of Lord Lovat's 51st Highland Division commandos

who landed at Sword Beach and who were famously piped over the bridge by Lovat's personal piper, Bill Millin. The museum stayed open for our arrival and it is well worth a visit with countless artefacts from the action around the bridge on D-Day – the original bridge is now in the



museum grounds along with military hardware used at the time. With Jim on the pipes preceding the party it was a very emotional walk over Pegasus Bridge. We then crossed the river by the new bridge to visit the first house to be liberated by the Allies on D-Day, the Cafe Gondree. This very small cafe is a living museum to the D-Day landings and is crammed full of photographs and memorabilia – sadly, the welcome from the present generation of the Gondree family was “tepid” at best, despite the kilts and almost all the party decamped to the cafe on the opposite side of the road beside the one of only four British Centaur tanks still in existence. The visit was crowned by the arrival of the owners of the WW2 Willys Jeep parked beside the tank who offered to take us up to Sword Beach and the monument to Lovat’s piper Bill Millin. Within moments of arriving, the skirl of Jim’s pipes had the place crammed with onlookers!



It was time to head for our overnight stop at Crepon and the luxurious “Manoir de Mathan”. This hotel dates from 1605 when it was formerly a farm and the buildings were extended to form three sides of a courtyard. The rooms (with solid heavy doors) are very tastefully furnished with antiques and vintage objects d’art. Having quickly settled into our rooms, we were whisked off to the nearby restaurant “Ferme de la Ranconniere” (www.ranconniere.fr), where a most appetising dinner of Norman cuisine was served in the oak beamed restaurant. The original buildings date from the 13th century although a major reconstruction took place in the early 17th century. The farm and the buildings were requisitioned by German forces during the war and it became a camp with an airfield nearby. Over the intervening years the buildings have been carefully restored. Certainly an evening and venues to remember fondly.



In the morning we departed for our visit to Chateau Falaise, (www.chateau-guillaume-leconquerant.fr) stronghold of Guillaume le Conquerant (William the Conqueror). This in fact was the birthplace of William in 1028. The castle remained the property of his heirs until it was captured by Philip 2nd of France in the 13th century. Possession of the castle changed hands several times during the Hundred



Years War and it was finally deserted in the 17th century. Since 1840 it has been protected as an historic monument. Undoubtedly the castle, a mighty and imposing structure, would have been easily defended, standing as it is on the edge of a cliff. It has to be said however, that restoration of the castle is somewhat unique in as much as a modern interpretation of artefacts has sympathetically been effected utilising 21st century materials like concrete and steel. The rooms are sparsely furnished and much reliance is placed on audio visual displays on video screens or beamed onto the castle walls. Certainly an interesting visit but the modern interpretation of restoration in the writer’s

eyes seemed contrastingly at odds with the historic stonework and fabric of the stronghold. A rustic lunch was enjoyed in a small local restaurant with the almost obligatory local version of tarte tatin as dessert.



Then it was off across country for our overnight stay on Mont Saint Michel, the UNESCO World Heritage Site, about one kilometre off the north coast in the estuary of the River Couesnon. This rocky tidal island has been home to a monastic establishment since the 8th century although much of what we see today dates from the 12th/13th centuries. Interestingly, its popularity and prestige as a centre of pilgrimage over the centuries waned with the Reformation and by the time of the French Revolution there were scarcely any monks left. The abbey was then closed and converted into a prison

but by the mid 1800's after much campaigning, the prison was finally closed and the mount was declared an historical monument in 1874. The structural composition of the town exemplifies the feudal system that built it – on top God, the abbey and monastery, below this the Great Halls, then stores and housing and at the bottom, outside the walls, fishermen and farmers housing. We would be staying on the mount in the hotel “Les Terrasses Poulard” (www.terasses-poulard.fr) part way up the narrow main street.....and then up the steps. And for some of us that meant 127 steps to reach our part of the hotel!

Having dumped the cases, the more energetic of the party assembled back on the main street and split into two groups to tour the abbey and.....yes, you've guessed – that meant climbing more steps - as they say in Glasgow “hunners and hunners!” The abbey tour was most informative and interesting, (although somewhat exhausting) and the views quite spectacular. The tour culminated in a walk around the ramparts before we headed back to the hotel for a wee rest. Dinner that night would be taken at the famed “La Mere Poulard” restaurant just along from the hotel on Main Street (www.merepoulard.com) where we enjoyed the renowned “Omlette Mere Poulard”, the ingredients of which are a closely guarded secret, although it is quite possible to watch the chefs whisking up the mixture. Light, fluffy and certainly moreish and that was followed by a lamb dish (the local sheep feed on the salt laden grasses on the coast and this gives the meat a distinctive tang). Before heading back to the hotel (and up the 127 steps again!) time was taken to appreciate the floodlit abbey and spire above us – quite spectacular!



We were scheduled to visit a cheese dairy the following morning but we hadn't quite bargained for a 6am start to the day. Breakfast enjoyed, we trundled out into the darkness to board the shuttle bus back to our own coach in the parking area. The Graindorge Fromagerie in Livarot (www.graindorge.fr) (over 100 years old and with a vintage Citroen truck on the forecourt) was reached in good time and we were free to tour the facility, learning about the company, their different cheeses and then watching the production processes before heading for the tasting room where we were able to taste four of their cheeses including Camembert, Pont l'Eveque, Livarot and Neufchatel. Our route back to the coach was through the retail outlet and inevitably, purchases were made of not only cheeses but preserves also.

By now, lunch time was approaching and we headed for the small town of Saint Julien Le Faucon in the Pays d'Auge – were we in for a bit of a surprise!



The fairly small half timbered house (1550) which is characteristic of the Auge region features two dining areas and we were ushered into the second one “La Puce a l’Oreille”. The scene was set on entry as we spied a 1950’s Lambretta scooter in the foyer along with a working juke box of the period with some real golden oldies. In “La Puce” (a small mechanical music museum) the place mats were old

78 records (now, who remembers them!?!) and the room was filled with 50’s/60’s memorabilia plus numerous musical instruments. The lunch was traditional regional fare and most acceptable and as we finished, there appeared to be the local priest trying to gain entry through the patio doors with an old motorised bicycle. This in fact turned out to be Michel Hazard, the owner of the establishment and he then proceeded to entertain and actively involve the group in the demonstration of the many and varied musical instruments, juke boxes, barrel organs and gramophones of times past. We were hilariously entertained for the best part of an hour before Michel, still dressed like a priest, held up the



traffic to allow our coach onto the road to head for the Calvados distillery of Domaine Pierre Huet at Cambremer.



A most interesting tour of the distillery (www.calvados-huet.com) preceded a rather enjoyable tasting of several of the Calvados expressions for which this top producer is renowned. Suitably “refreshed” we sank back into our seats on the coach as Herve headed back to Rouen and rather expertly managed to avoid most of

the rush hour traffic, no mean feat!

The closing dinner of the Tour would be in the Hotel les Elfes in Notre-Dame-de-Bondeville on the outskirts of Rouen, traditional Norman dishes both satisfying and filling – a most convivial evening with our fellow Confreres who had accompanied us on the Tour. Much appreciation from the Scottish party to both Janine Bigot and Patrick Etienne for their endeavours in making all the arrangements for the tour. All that remained was our return to bonnie (and slightly chillier)



Scotland with many memories of a very enjoyable and interesting tour of Normandy.

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